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ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME ON SCREEN

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Edited by

Arthur J. Pomeroy

Victoria University of Wellington
Wellington, New Zealand

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This edition first published 2017
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

9781118741351 (hardback)

Cover Image: © AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo
Cover Design: Wiley

Set in 11/13.5pt Galliard by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Notes on Contributors ix

Introduction 1
Arthur J. Pomeroy

PART I The Development of the Depiction of Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen 15

1 Greece and Rome on Screen: On the Possibilities and Promises of a New Medium 17
Pantelis Michelakis

2 The Creation of the Epic: Italian Silent Film to 1915 37
Irmbert Schenk

3 From 1916 to the Arrival of Sound: The Systematization, Expressivity and Self-reflection of the Feature Film 61
Maria Wyke

4 The Resurgence of Epics in the 1950s: Classical Antiquity in Post-war Hollywood 91
Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos

5 Hollywood Ascendant: *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus* 119
Fiona Radford

6 The Peplum Era 145
Arthur J. Pomeroy

PART II Comedy, Drama, and Adaptation **161**

7 Hollywood Meets Art-House Cinema: Michael Cacoyannis's "Hybrid" Euripidean Trilogy 163
Anastasia Bakogianni

8 Greek Tragedy as Theater in Screen-Media 187
Meredith E. Safran

9 Greece and Rome on the Comic Screen 209
Lisa Maurice

10 The Return of a Genre 233
Jerry Benjamin Pierce

11 Franco Rossi's Adaptations of the Classics 253
Arthur J. Pomeroy

12 *I, Claudius* and Ancient Rome as Televised Period Drama 271
Juliette Harrisson

13 Premium Cable Television 293
Monica S. Cyrino

14 Thinking through the Ancient World: "Late Antique Movies" as a Mirror of Shifting Attitudes towards Christian Religion 307
Filippo Carlà-Uhink

15 Non-western Approaches to the Ancient World: India and Japan—Classical Heritage or Exotic Occidentalism? 329
Anja Wieber

PART III Film Production and Ancient World Cinema **349**

16 Man to Man: Music and Masculine Relations in *Ben-Hur* (1925 and 1959) 351
Stephan Prock

17 Visual Poetry on Screen: Sets and Costumes for Ancient Greek Tragedy 385
Alejandro Valverde García

18 Filming the Ancient World: Have Film Historians Made a Spectacular Omission of Epic Proportions? 403
Harriet Margolis

PART IV The Ancient World as an Idea **427**

19 High Art and Low Art Expectations: Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture 429
Alastair J. L. Blanshard

20 "Soft" Science Fiction and Technical Fantasy: The Ancient World in *Star Trek, Babylon 5, Battlestar Galactica* and *Dr Who* 449
Otta Wenskus

21 The Ancient World is Part of Us: Classical Tragedy in Modern Film and Television 467
Anastasia Bakogianni

22 Ancient World Documentaries 491
Fiona Hobden

23 Mythology for the Young at Heart 515
Martin Lindner

Index 535

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and religion in epic films: The fifties' advocate for Christian conversion and today's pillar of paganism?" in F. Carlà and I. Berti (eds.), *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts.* (Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 225–240.

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Introduction

Arthur J. Pomeroy

As far back as we can trace, the stories that were transmitted in the Greek-speaking communities in the Mediterranean changed in focus and form in each generation. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are simply two outstanding examples of a series of narratives associated with the Trojan War, which themselves borrowed elements from Near Eastern stories in addition to legends that may have originated with the Indo-European ancestors of the Bronze Age Greeks. Other arts developed and, most importantly, came to be preserved. Versions of the earlier tales were depicted in the visual arts, in statuary and on Greek vases. They were also presented in dramatic form, particularly in classical Athenian tragedy, which, unfortunately, like a lost silent film, can only be reconstructed from the surviving scripts and a smattering of other evidence. For instance, we know something about the stage, but the *mise-en-scène* remains open to speculation, and the music and dancing that accompanied performance is almost entirely lost. The conquests of Alexander the Great spread Hellenistic culture further east, while Rome's conquest of Greece meant the absorption of Greek stories and style into a new empire. The Romans also created self-conscious imitations of earlier Greek stories, most notably in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the story of a defeated Trojan who defied all odds in creating a home for his people in Italy and so became the Romans' ancestor. Christianity, an off-shoot of Judaic traditions, in its desire to encompass all ethnic groups, found that it often had to absorb or be absorbed within Greco-Roman culture. In the West, Christianity preserved much from

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
© 2017 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2017 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

the classical past and added the tales of the peoples of northern Europe. In the East, Islam became dominant, but stories of earlier times, such as the Alexander Romance, continued to thrive. It would take too long to describe the multiple receptions of the Greek and Roman worlds since the Renaissance: painting and sculpture, drama and opera, poetry and novels all offered new modes for serving up material from the past. In brief: adoption and adaptation, a process that continues to the present day as new media are explored and used in turn to explore tradition.

We tend to regard the display of moving images on film as a comparatively recent invention, but prior to the work of the Lumière brothers there were devices that displayed pictures (either photographs or drawings) sequentially to give the impression of continuous motion. Initially the viewer looked at a sequence of cards, but by the mid-nineteenth century machines had been invented to project the images on a screen. Such devices could entertain large numbers of viewers and so were in line with the development of public entertainment that followed the industrial revolution. These entertainments could wondrously recreate traditional stories. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) popularized the results of excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum, while drawing its immediate inspiration from Karl Briulov's recently completed painting depicting the destruction of the Roman city. While the rise of the railway and the lengthy journeys associated with this means of travel contributed to the success of romantic novels, the development of traveling shows by entrepreneurs such as Barnum and Bailey also pointed the way to extensive fireworks displays, culminating in the regular performance of pyrodramas involving the eruption of Vesuvius. The popularity of Lew Wallace's novel, *Ben-Hur* (1880), led to a Broadway stage version in 1899, employing live horses on treadmills to recreate the famous chariot race. This, in turn, inspired the Kalem company to film an unauthorized version of the story in 1907. This was accomplished using the Coney Island site and props that Pain's Fireworks Company had used for pyrodramas and recreation of Roman chariot races. Add in music (John Philip Sousa, for instance, published his *Last Days of Pompeii* suite in 1912), and most of the elements of modern film are ready.

The most important feature of cinema is not, then, the moving image, but the possibility of mass reproduction. The bodybuilder, Eugen Sandow, travelled the world displaying his physique (one based on Greek and Roman sculpture) and popularizing physical culture. While the possibility of becoming a global phenomenon owes much to modern transport, not to mention the opening of the world via European colonialism, Edison Studios' series of short films on Sandow in 1894 made it possible for audiences to view his display of muscle flexing anywhere and at any time. This ability to constantly

reproduce could also work against the new medium: it was often viewed as a form for mass consumption, linked to the vaudeville halls and travelling shows where early films were often shown and considered to be entertainment for the masses, while live theatre and concerts were the preserve of the élite. The corporate nature of film-making, unlike the individual authorship of the novel,[1] also challenged the common ideal of the singular artist. Others, however, might praise cinema as embodying the spirit of modern industrial development (Benjamin 1936) or as an essential instrument of education for the general populace that supported the growing democracies of the Western world.

Whether we consider the streams of "realism," the documentary form visible in George Méliès' *Arrival of a Train at Vincennes Station* (1896), or fantasy and magic, as in Méliès' *The Vanishing Lady* of the same year, it is important that we take into consideration the investment in any film and its appeal to an audience in order to recoup its cost. While productions may have targeted audiences according to age or gender, for instance, from the beginning there was a wish to attract as large a group of viewers as possible. Cinematic "tie-ins" via product placement or marketing in conjunction with feature films begin quite early. The comparatively recent discipline of film studies has indicated the importance of understanding such features as the length of a film (is it a short, a television episode segmented by advertising breaks, or a full-length blockbuster, for instance). Technical matters also need careful consideration, such as the style of the camera work, the scenography, film stocks and picture ratios (including black and white, tinted, and color styles), sound (both accompanying music and sound effects or Foley), and a range of imaginary effects (double exposure of negatives, editing cuts, the use of Claymation or CGI). Then there are more general questions about the attitude of film-makers and audience ("the gaze"), expectations of actors and cultural biases (such as discussed in Richard Dyer's studies of Hollywood stars and of racial stereotypes (1979, 1997)). Story types become complicated when considered as cinematic genres. Science fiction may remain identifiable when it changes medium, as may detective stories, but Film Noir and Expressionism are descriptions of visual phenomena and have no clear analogies in written form.

I have stressed the complexity of understanding film, because it is not uncommon for scholars of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds and film-makers to talk past one another. The first can be seen in studies that describe depictions of the past as "un-historical." Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) is no more a documentary about the reign of Commodus than was its immediate inspiration, Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) (cf. the essays in Winkler 2004). In turn, classicists can sometimes feel that they

are only consulted by film-makers for minor details, rather than "authenticity" in the overall depiction (Coleman 2004; Milnor 2008).

Classical themes, such as the depiction of characters from Greek mythology (Méliès' *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1898) or epic (Méliès' *Ulysses and the Giant Polyphemus*, 1905) or from Roman history (Georges Hatot's *Nero Testing Poison on Slaves*, 1897), appeared at the very birth of the film industry. However, scholarly interest from classicists in the depiction of their area of research on the screen is comparatively recent. Jon Solomon's *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (1978, revised edition 2001) began the serious scholarly treatment of such material and remains a basic reference. Marianne McDonald's *Euripides in Cinema* (1983) indicated that it was possible to devote a monograph to the reproduction of drama in film. Yet perhaps the most significant advance in the cinematic reception of the past came in Maria Wyke's *Projecting Rome: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (1997) which combined film history and gender studies to examine the depiction of the ancient world. Since then Martin Winkler has been especially prolific in editing or authoring a remarkable number of volumes on the classical world in the cinema and on television in general or on individual films (e.g., 2001, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2009) that are repeatedly cited in this volume. The ever-increasing number of monographs, chapters, and articles appearing every year indicates the topical nature of investigation of the depiction of ancient Greece and Rome.

To no small extent, this corresponds with didactic requirements. Courses in reception studies or film have become a regular part of the syllabus in the English-speaking world. As was the case with Greek mythology from the 1970s onwards, it is often hoped that this will attract sufficient student numbers to compensate for reduced enrolments in Greek and Latin language courses. There are excellent textbooks to assist here (Cyrino 2005; Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011). However, as with mythology, mere retelling of the material will not be sufficient to stimulate students and certainly will not provide any basis for theoretical analysis of the subject matter. Given that many classicists have come to the area through reception or adaptation studies, one trend is to analyze the depiction of the ancient world in a literary fashion, in accord with the literal translation of photo-graphy as "writing with light." Cinema becomes drama, epic, or novel in a different medium, just as war, according to Clausewitz, was the continuation of politics by other means. For classicists, this also offers a reassuring priority to their area of expertise, historically and sometimes in status as well. However, the influence of reception studies means that there should not only be a comparison between the classical source and its later treatment, but also an attempt to explain why the two are not identical. Change may be the result of historical

circumstances (both political and economic), or the necessity to adapt to a different medium, or social and cultural differences. Such investigations have been particularly fruitful in revealing gender politics or racial and colonialist ideologies. At the same time, reactions to classical material bring into stark contrast aspects of the original. Analyzing a film from the 1950s requires both sensitivity to the differences between creations of that time and those contemporaneous with the modern audience, and also reflection on prior receptions and the earliest sources. The constant iteration of a figure such as Hercules makes the 1958 *Hercules* (*Le fatiche di Ercole*, "*The Labors of Hercules*") much more interesting than a simple analysis of the adventure might suggest. In addition, film (and television) studies, through their emphasis on the technical means of creating and distributing a moving picture, offer wider insights into classical material on screen, in the same way that theater studies have deepened our understanding of classical drama.

Bearing in mind that the field is in comparative infancy (and that new films and television series continue to appear every year), this volume is intended to give an outline of what has already been achieved in many areas to assist researchers and students in the field. It also, in my opinion, presents considerably more new research than would normally be seen in survey volumes. It is structured to offer an outline of the development of the presentation of the Greek and Roman worlds from the beginning of cinema to the present day (Parts I and II), followed by discussions of cinematic techniques associated with this material (Part III); while the final chapters in Part IV consider some of the thematic issues that present themselves to researchers in the field. The subject area is restricted to ancient Greece and Rome: this excludes, for instance, films about ancient Egypt or productions associated with the Bible. The latter are so numerous and so entwined with other considerations as to require a separate volume. Where the Roman world and Christianity cross paths, as most notably in the film versions of *Ben-Hur*, but also in tales of persecution as Christianity develops (a staple of 1950s Hollywood cinema, as the Coen Brothers have recently reminded us with their 2016 film, *Hail! Caesar*), and in the world of late antiquity, that material is included.

Not everything has been discussed. I am conscious that there is a gap between the investigation of post-First World War silent films and that of the great Hollywood epics of the 1950s. A number of contributors do, however, consider the work of Cecil B. DeMille, whose *The Sign of the Cross* (1932; re-released 1944) may be seen as the link between this period and the 1950 version of *Quo Vadis*. A study of films of the fascist era, in particular Carmine Gallone's *Scipio Africanus* (1937), is forthcoming (Pomeroy 2017). *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) are short-changed. However, Martin Winkler's edited volume (2009) on the latter

should satisfy most readers. A full study of the Burton–Taylor film is highly desirable – in the meantime, the 2001 documentary by Kevin Burns and Brent Zachy, *Cleopatra: The Film that Changed Hollywood*, is a good introduction. A number of films of the post-2000 era (e.g., *Gladiator, Troy* and *Alexander*) have already had individual volumes devoted to them (Winkler 2004, 2007a; Cartledge and Greenland 2010) and so can be treated in passing in this volume. Non-English language productions may have been short-changed: the Romanian films from the 1960s involving the Romans and the Dacians (Elley 2013: 58–59) are sadly omitted, while it would be a truly Herculean effort to track down all classical references in Japanese animated films (*anime*). Still, Jarman's *Sebastiane* (in Latin) receives its due. Television has not been fully discussed (no *Xena* or *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* – next time, perhaps …). I am also conscious that there is much more that can be said about the techniques of creating films and television series, but the chapters in this volume should encourage others to continue this work. And while there is no piece specifically devoted to the important topic of gender studies, a number of the contributions show the importance of feminism, queer and masculinity studies as explanatory tools in this field.

Even more than printed material, film needs preservation. Film archives around the world are engaged in the recovery and restoration not only of much early material, but also of films from quite recent times whose stock has deteriorated with often frightening speed. These "texts" can also survive in multiple versions, depending on cuts and editing, and in various formats (most obviously in versions created for television, where wide-screen films have commonly been adapted to a standard 4 : 3 ratio, often by a process named "pan and scan," and often cut to fit better with advertising breaks). Accordingly, Pantelis Michelakis begins the volume by initially considering the question of the survival of ancient films and access to this material, before raising the important question of why the very modern form of continuous photography should be interested in the ancient world at all. Many explanations have been offered for this phenomenon: Michaelakis stresses in addition that the past can offer not merely escapism, but an imaginative response to the rapidly changing world at the turn of the twentieth century. As he indicates, early films reference not merely the Greek and Roman worlds, but also versions of them created over the centuries. The importance of the spectators must not be underestimated, nor the means of impressing them. While early cinema is often thought of as a world of black and white, in reality many films were tinted in sections and a considerable number carefully colored for maximum effect. A case can be made for the "development" of techniques, but, as Michaelakis indicates, many examples would call into question any treatment of film history as simply a steady progression of cinema to its most recent forms.

The particularly successful development of film-making in Italy is traced by Irmbert Schenk. The expansion of its studios and the increase in length and complexity of the films produced, culminating in 1914 with Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria*, illustrates a desire for a national cinema recalling the country's history, while also reflecting the process of industrialization in the peninsula. However, the increasing demand for investment could not be sustained after Italy's entry into the First World War: the United States, which had previously lagged behind in large-scale productions, came to dominate, with the rise of the major studios of Hollywood. As Maria Wyke demonstrates, post-war Italian efforts showed few artistic or technical developments. In the meantime, American films such as *Cleopatra*, starring Theda Bara (1917), or *Ben-Hur* (1925), with Ramon Novarro in the leading role, indicate the rise of the star system that accompanied other developments in the Hollywood studio system. The chariot race in the latter became the standard for technology in the service of audience excitement until the even more impressive remake of 1959. Still, national cinemas continued to thrive, as in Germany through Manfred Noa's spectacular *Helen of Troy* (*Helena*, 1924) that has only recently been restored and made available, and in France, where ancient-world stories, whether recounted in elegiac or comic mode, could allow reflection on the country's recent losses,

The Second World War might be expected to have further reinforced the dominance of Hollywood, but in fact the American studios faced internal competition from the new medium of television. Konstantinos Nikoloutsos shows how many of the features of modern popular cinema, such as wide-screen photography and color film, developed in this era. "Blockbuster" movies showed all the features of studio film-making: lavish sets, international cast and crews, and often overseas locations, partially chosen for their exotic appeal, but also for financial reasons: for instance, to expend profits that could not be repatriated in countries where low-cost labor was readily available. The popularity of biblical stories (a staple of film-making from the beginning: Vander Stichele 2013) also encouraged screen versions of novels that showed the development of Christianity in the Roman World (for instance, *Quo Vadis, The Robe* or *Ben-Hur*), sometimes as updates of earlier Hollywood successes (*Ben-Hur, Cleopatra*). The competition with television and between studios also encouraged expenditure on an unheard-of scale, culminating in the financial crisis caused by the excesses of *Cleopatra* (1963). The internal machinations that accompanied these large productions are detailed in Fiona Radford's chapter, which provides a clear warning to those who would like to imply that there are specific intentions within these films. Even with considerable archival material at our disposal, it is often difficult to discover who made crucial decisions about plotlines and script. As is

shown very clearly with regard to *Spartacus* (1960), individuals may make their own contributions that can contradict or cancel the efforts of other members of the production team.

Hollywood's preeminence at the box-office internationally did not, however, preclude national cinemas. In my chapter I demonstrate how the peplum film was the love-child of traditional Italian entertainment films and Hollywood epic. Although it was a short-lived, if prolific, movement, the peplum was significant for the continuation of the film-making industry in Italy. It also had a long-lasting effect on the public imagination, especially in America, setting a pattern for the revival of the figure of Hercules on television thirty years later. Often mocked or reviled, the peplum has its own rules that, when recognized, help to explain the idiosyncrasies of this much-encompassing form.

The reign of Hollywood blockbusters set in the ancient world came to an end in 1965, only to be revived by Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* in 2000, and the Italian production of peplums also ceased around the same time. This does not mean that other cinemas and film genres were not interested in Greece and Rome: these and the new form of television are surveyed in Part II of this volume. In modern Greece, Michael Cacoyannis was equally successful with modern-day tales (*Stella*, 1995; *Zorba the Greek*, 1964) and versions of Euripidean tragedy. Anastasia Bakogianni traces the development of Cacoyannis's style, originally owing much to the theater but adopting many of the features of commercial cinema as time passed. Although, perhaps, Cacoyannis is not as "Art House" as his Italian contemporary, Pasolini, he clearly regarded his films as artistic productions and reached an international audience while stressing the continuity between ancient and modern Greece. By contrast, Meredith Safran details efforts to retain the theatrical in film versions of Greek tragedy as staged by the likes of Tyrone Guthrie, Martha Graham, Julie Taymor and Steven Berkoff. She also analyzes the relationship between theater and television, from a period where public television saw one of its duties to be the education of its viewers, to more recent times where commercial imperatives have come to the fore. The odd standing of Greek tragedy, which appears to be a special-interest art form but can be readily repositioned to raise contemporary social questions, is highlighted throughout.

Not that the ancient world need always be a serious topic, as Lisa Maurice brings out in her survey of comic treatments of the past. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* has been a major inspiration through to Spike Lee's recent *Chi-Raq* (2015), while the characters of Greek mythology have also been a steady source of mirth, particularly Hercules, whose colossal strength was already depicted in classical times as accompanied by astounding appetites. In

general, the Roman world receives more attention than the Greek, in part because the Plautine figure of the crafty slave has become part of Western theater, in part because Roman grandeur and imperial ambitions lend themselves to mockery. Monty Python's famous question, "What have the Romans done for us?", both acknowledges and mocks the importance of classical culture.

The answer, as Jerry Pierce indicates, is to provide us with vicarious enjoyment of decadence. The luxurious lifestyles of the rich and powerful that were one of the attractions for viewers of the 1917 *Cleopatra* return with a vengeance in *Gladiator* (2000), *Alexander* (2004), and *300* (2006). Still, in the age of the Kardashians, excess needs to be truly excessive. Joaquin Phoenix's Commodus is not simply bisexual, as Olivier's Crassus is depicted in *Spartacus*, but incestuous and a potential pedophile as well. Sexuality becomes a major driver in the narrative of series such as *Rome*, apparently reaching a climax in the STARZ network's *Spartacus.* To misquote Lord Acton, following Alistair Cooke, the voice of culture to America, "Power corrupts. Absolute power is absolutely delicious!" (Cooke 1998).

The significance of television as transmitter of the image of the past is examined in the next three studies. I analyze the "quality drama" that Franco Rossi produced for RAI (Radiotelevisione italiana), particularly underlining the director's desire to avoid the clichés associated with the recreation of classical literature and the portrayal of the ancient world. The foreignness of the past thus depicted allows the viewer to dwell on other universal themes, such as Odysseus's nostalgia for his home, Aeneas's concern for the survivors of the Trojan race, or the concern for the poor and powerless of early Christianity. BBC Television also produced a remarkable adaptation of Robert Graves' novel, *I, Claudius.* Juliette Harrisson shows how the series fitted into the tradition of "classic serial," but was distinguished by its success in ambivalently depicting empire and class, which sets it apart from soap opera in a foreign setting. Its impact can be traced in both the films of the new millennium (it is no accident that Derek Jacoby plays the role of Senator Gracchus in *Gladiator*) and its television (in *Rome*, in general, and the character of a much younger Livia, in particular). The last study of small-screen drama is contributed by Monica Cyrino, the editor of several collections of essays on HBO–BBC *Rome* and STARZ *Spartacus* (Cyrino 2008, 2015; Augoustakis and Cyrino 2016). Rightly noting the commercial imperatives of such series (*Rome* was concluded in two seasons because of the excessive costs of production, while the lower-cost *Spartacus* could even add a prequel season in response to the lead actor's illness), she stresses that despite an interest in archaeological correctness, Rome has become not an historical site but a locus for fantasy, a predecessor to the medieval England of *Game of Thrones.*

The world of late antiquity in contrast to the period of early Christianity has tended to be the preserve of European cinema. This may be a sign of unwillingness in Hollywood to depict organized religion with its sectarian overtones. Still, as Filippo Carlà-Uhink demonstrates, there had been a reluctance even in predominantly Catholic countries such as Italy and Spain to portray state-sponsored religion post-Constantine the Great. From the 1970s, however, the crisis of the Roman Empire became a screen metaphor for the modern world, whether this be a crisis in faith, as in Roberto Rosselini's *Agostino d'Ippona* (1972), or the sexual politics of homosexuality (Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane*, 1976). Rising above a number of small-scale depictions of the late Roman world, Alejandro Amenábar's epic story of Hypatia in fourth-century Alexandria, *Agora* (2009), is particularly striking for its criticism of irrational religious belief when associated with power. That the film was not very successful at the box office indicates that successful cinema tends to reflect the conservative audience values of the time (cf. the uncontroversial *Gladiator* which earned much more at the box office than Oliver Stone's *Alexander*).

Moving further afield, Anja Wieber's study of the Indian film, *Sikandar*, Osamu Tezuka's Japanese animated *Cleopatra*, and the Japanese–Korean television anime, *Reign: The Conqueror*, highlights the question of the degree to which the classical world is a signifier of Western cultural dominance. If the history of Greece and Rome may have been placed in the service of imperialism, it is also possible for outsiders to use the same material to critique colonialism or to suggest that syntheses of occidental and oriental ideas are also significant in social development in both East and West.

Part III is a brief reminder that film is not merely a photo-play (as earlier cinema was sometimes called), but the combination of various artistic skills. Perhaps most significant is the role of sound, a theme that classicists working from printed texts are most likely to overlook. There were, of course, musical accompaniments to drama and pantomimes in the ancient world, but that material is almost completely lost. "Silent" cinema was rarely silent, since musical accompaniments were regular from early on, and might be distinctly loud (a full orchestra played Pizzetti's Fire Symphony at the premiere of *Cabiria* in Turin, April 18, 1914). The style of music also offered valuable clues as to the nature of events portrayed: in Chapter 16, Stephan Prock shows that the score to the 1925 version of *Ben-Hur* was deliberately reverential because of the religious sub-text of "A Tale of the Christ." By contrast, Miklós Rózsa's score for the 1959 remake not only sexualizes the power relationship between the Roman Empire and conquered Judaea, but also stresses the masculinity of the film's hero in line with contemporary expectations. As Prock indicates, however, this approach may also underline

questions about the relationships between the male leads, avoided in the 1925 film. At the same time, the triumphant "Christ" music plays a more pronounced role, since the figure of the Savior is notably silent in this modern "talkie."

Alongside the music (and sound effects), the staging and costuming create an image within which the actors can perform and the cinematographers perform their magic. Although often overlooked, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences presently awards Oscars for original scores, sound editing and sound mixing, visual effects, production design, makeup and hairstyle, and costume design. The visual design of Michael Cacoyannis's *Electra* (1962) is obviously quite different from that of Pietro Francisci's *Hercules* (1958). As Alejandro Valverde García demonstrates, this is to no small degree the work of the different art directors in reflecting the style of each production. It is impossible to cover the wide range of possibilities for depictions of the ancient world, but by discussing the films of Michael Cacoyannis, Valverde reveals how important art direction is in creating meaning within the cooperative enterprise that is realized in the final film print.

Most of the contributors to this volume would probably describe themselves generically as classicists (a sociologist and a musicologist are also among the participants): this refers both to the subject matter they study and the programs in which they are employed. Genre, however, may mean something else in film studies, as film historian Harriet Margolis shows. None would describe themselves as makers of ancient-world films, which has had the unfortunate effect of hiding a whole genre in film history from its specialists. The dangers of compartmentalizing in academic disciplines are here clearly indicated.

The final section looks at some of the siblings of ancient world films and television series, ranging from the lowly regarded to the Art House, from the insertion of classical themes and mythology in science fiction to serious documentaries. As always, the audience must be taken into consideration. Alastair Blanshard identifies accessibility (Hercules and gladiators are universally recognized, while Virgil is not) as the initial attraction of stories set in the past for film-makers. However, it is the excess of the past, whether it be the opulence of Nero's court or the efforts of a demi-god, that appeals to the audience. The Roman side usually won out over Greek simplicity, but the "muscle-man" film, from Bartolomeo Pagano to Steve Reeves and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, has thrived from the silent period to the present day.

Science fiction series on television derive their appeal from a fantasy version of science. Otta Wenskus's chapter makes clear that an equally imaginary treatment of the ancient past is thus a relatively simple insertion in the genre.

Particularly striking is the use of classical material to give an "intellectual" depth to the stories, a relic of the high versus low culture debate that has still not been settled. At the level of "Art House" cinema, Anastasia Bakogianni shows that the figure of Electra can still inform modern narratives. In Italy, Luchino Visconti (*Sandra*, 1965), in Hungary, Miklós Janscó (*Electra, My Love*, 1974) and in Greece, Theo Angelopoulos (*The Travelling Players*, 1975), used the character from Greek tragedy to inform their depictions of their countries' tragic past. But Electra is also reincarnated in Frank Miller's Elektra, the heroine of DC Comics and two films and is adumbrated in the female Count of Monte Cristo of television's *Revenge*. Reception may call into question traditional aesthetic judgements as much as support them.

Since the ancient world precedes the invention of photography, there are obviously no contemporary film records. Yet, as the attraction of film is the moving image, still images of Greek and Roman art and archaeology are insufficient. The dramatic aspects of documentary are highlighted by the inclusion of fictional segments or modern features, such as the voice of the newsreader, anachronistically applied to the past. Fiona Hobden shows the importance of the stress on authority in the narrative voices, how the documentary becomes an old-style classroom lesson where knowledge is imparted, but the audience is unable to question what they have learnt. We may feel that we are making a tour with an agreeable companion, but the power of academia abides. An alternative approach, of adapting the past to modern narrative genres, can be seen in *Cleopatra: Portrait of a Killer* (2009), drawing on modern crime fiction. The docudrama straddles both worlds: it may enable the viewer to gain a personal appreciation of the ancient world; its reflection can also be seen in the figure of the herald in the television series *Rome*. As Hobden notes, the re-use of Ian McNeice, the actor who played that character, to portray Cassius Dio, the historian, in *Portrait of a Killer* lends an odd authenticity from fictional repetition.

The audience is also important to Martin Lindner, who considers a particular sub-genre of features set in ancient Greece and Rome, films or television series specifically designed to attract youthful viewers. As he rightly notes, the actual audience may be much larger, including adults enjoying such productions and the parents who may be accompanying the youngsters (or at least sharing the room where the television is located). Disney's *Hercules* (1997) is typical with a moral message for the young and ironic meanings for older viewers. That such films do not faithfully follow the traditional narrative is not a fault, but an indication of adjustments for children in the present day. Entertainment, not didacticism, is the prime mover. Still, the differences between East and West German versions of Odysseus, for instance, are interesting reflections of each community. Similar comments

can be made about the Korean, Japanese and Australian versions. To repeat the author's conclusion, after an extensive account of other young persons' films and television series, "for children" is not the same as "childish."

The range of studies in this volume, with contributors from numerous countries, is indicative of the resonance and vibrancy of studies of ancient Greece and Rome at present. Of course, each year results in not only new or revived receptions (as I write, *Ben-Hur* 2016 is the most recent release), but also better appreciation of material from earlier years. My thanks to my collaborators for their efforts. And my encouragement for those who will be writing on these topics in the years to come!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this project was substantially assisted by grants from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. My thanks to Jake Arthur for translation from Spanish and Charlotte Simmonds for German. Especial thanks to Emily Simons who assisted with the editing of contributions throughout this project. Finally, I must acknowledge the assistance of the editorial staff at Wiley-Blackwell, most notably Haze Humbert and Danisha Sahedevan.

NOTE

1. It may be noted that some authors had already experimented with the mass production model. For instance, Alexandre Dumas could be both prolific and fully enjoy the rewards of his work by entrusting others (most notably Jules Maquet) to develop the outlines that he rapidly sketched.

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PART I

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DEPICTION OF ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME ON SCREEN

CHAPTER ONE

Greece and Rome on Screen: On the Possibilities and Promises of a New Medium

Pantelis Michelakis

Contrary to the widely held view that early films are largely lost, dozens of films related to ancient Greece, Rome and the other civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean survive scattered in film archives across Europe and North America. Only a small number of these films have been restored digitally and made available through home-video formats or online video streaming. The great majority of the films is accessible only through film prints available for onsite viewing in archival film collections with flatbed film-viewing facilities or in specialized film festivals. With the help of the "Treasures from the Film Archives" database of the International Federation of Film Archives, the open access database of the "Media History Digital Library" and the online catalogues of film archives, libraries and other institutions, one can trace a significant number of films made during the first twenty years of cinema. One can also collect valuable information about their production, distribution and exhibition with the help of ephemera such as production stills, screenplays, posters, reviews and film catalogues. What is distinctive about this body of archival films and its contexts? Why is it that a viewing technology and an art form associated with modernity turned its attention to antiquity from the very beginning? Which antiquity did it engage with? These are the questions that will form the basis for the discussion undertaken in this chapter.

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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Film or Cinema?

The focus of this chapter is on the first two decades of cinema, and more specifically on the period between the 1890s and the mid-1900s which is often identified as "early cinema" and the period from around 1907 to around 1913 which is often referred to as the "transitional period." The cinema of this twenty-year period is often defined in opposition to the more familiar and mainstream types of cinema that follow it. It is called a period of "short films" (as opposed to "feature films"), or "trick films" (a dominant genre of the period to be eclipsed by the arrival of some of the more canonical genres with which we are familiar today), as "cinema of attractions" (as opposed to a cinema preoccupied with narrative causality and character development; Gunning 1990), as "kine-attractography" (as opposed to the more conventional "cinema"; Gaudreault 2011) or more broadly as a period of sensationalism or exhibitionism (as opposed to the realism or artistic maturity of later cinema). How to describe this period is inevitably implicated in debates about continuity and change in cinema history. It is also implicated in debates about what cinema is. Is it a technological medium, an art form or an industry? If cinema is understood as moving images, as filmstrips run in rapid succession to give the illusion of lifelike movement, it was born with Thomas Edison's kinematoscope films or with Etienne-Jules Marey's chronophotography films at the turn of the 1890s. If understood as filmstrips run through a projector, it was invented by the Lumière brothers in the mid-1890s. If understood as a social practice or as an art form, cinema was formed at a later stage, around 1910. The word "cinematograph" itself is a classicizing neologism ("writing of movement") with a complex history: it is commonly associated with the camera invented by the Lumière brothers, but it was first coined by Léon Bouly for another motion picture device in 1892, whereas in its abbreviated form, "cinema" began to be used as a label for moving images only from the late 1910s.

It is common to see film history in biological terms, through a model of growth that raises questions about origins while also infantilizing cinema's first two decades. It is also common to see film history in teleological terms, with the two most dominant modes being those of a drive towards artistic maturity (cinema as an art in an upward trajectory from primitive to sophisticated and from naïve to self-aware) and of a drive towards realism (cinema as popular culture moving from silent to sound to color to widescreen to 3D). These two narratives are often in tension (cinema as an art form versus cinema as popular culture), but they both cast early cinema in the same position of infantile lack and inferiority. Applying their logic within the period itself before 1914, one can argue for a progression from the shorter and

more naïve films of the 1890s to the longer, more complex, more sophisticated, artistically more mature and technically more competent and realistic films of the late 1900s and the early 1910s. This is certainly a way of thinking endorsed by many of the film practitioners of the time themselves and exploited to the full by the publicity campaigns around them in an attempt to gain an advantage over their competitors. In fact, a large number of films related to antiquity belong to the rather limited output of quality films, especially adaptations, produced from around 1907. The pressure to demonstrate that film had matured and that it needed to be taken seriously as an art form can be linked to the greater reliance on narrative complexity and psychological characters after 1906, with films such as *A Slave's Love* (1907), to some of the first artistically ambitious films aimed to attract middle-class audiences produced by the French company Film d'Art in 1908, such as *The Return of Ulysses*, to the cultural debate about moving pictures in the United States which starts with films such as *Julius Caesar* in 1908, and to the first international successes of Italian cinema between 1909 and 1911 with films such as *Nero* (1909), *The Fall of Troy* (1910) and *Odyssey* (1911).

There are, however, other interpretative possibilities that in recent years have gained more traction. One can argue that cinema as an institution did not really take shape until around 1910; that before this time, the practice of filmstrip projection should be seen not in relation to a cinema to come, but in relation to technological and artistic developments that began much earlier in the nineteenth century and of which the projection of filmstrips was not always the inevitable conclusion. For instance, the "cinematograph" could be linked to other inventions of the nineteenth century that were preoccupied with still images, moving images, or projection and that were driven by the double imperative of science and entertainment: from photography and magic lantern slides to devices such as the phenakistiscope, the stroboscope, the tachyscope and chronophotography (Crary 1990). With the exception of photography, such devices may have now been reduced to mere technological curiosities, but their impact on nineteenth-century visions of antiquity must not be underestimated (however under-researched). Early films themselves are full of visual devices, both real and imagined. For instance, in George Méliès' *Long Distance Wireless Photography* (*La photographie électrique à distance*, 1908), a large fantastic machine is used to project on a screen an image of a small painting depicting the Three Graces. Upon projection, the Three Muses come to life, to the amazement of the photographer's clients. The machine that dominates the film frame compresses the various phases between film recording and film exhibition into something resembling real-time televisual liveness (Olsson 2005: 152). At the same time, the transformation of the motionless goddesses on the canvas to live

models on the screen demonstrates how the technology of the period seeks to transcend representational realism and promises access to the embodied reality of beauty and grace that traditional arts can only imitate.

The practice of projecting filmstrips can also be seen as coexisting with, drawing on, and competing against dominant forms of stage entertainment and display practices of a fin-de-siècle culture. Early cinema has an often-neglected affinity to visual spectacles of the period with a strong performative quality, such as magic sketches, magic lantern shows, fairy plays, pantomime and variety shows. When taken into consideration, this affinity plays an important role in early cinema's unique status and "troubling alien quality" (Gaudreault 2011: 34). For instance, in Méliès' *Long Distance Wireless Photography*, the animation of the pictorial depiction of the Three Graces situates the film not only in relation to real and imagined visual technologies of the period but also in relation to the entertainment world of vaudeville and more specifically to the popular performance practice of *tableaux vivants* or "living pictures." In another film by Méliès, *Jupiter's Thunderbolts* (*Le Tonnerre de Jupiter*, 1903), the king of the gods conjures the nine Muses in a hall of his celestial palace on Mount Olympus. The Muses first appear as statues before they then come to life, beginning to dance and sing for (and with) him, until their cacophony and unruliness make him dismiss them, at which point they are made to turn back to stone and then to disappear again. What we have here is the film's director, stage designer, producer and protagonist as the new master of the arts, with the power to conjure up painting, sculpture, song, music and dance, to combine them into an intermedial and interactive spectacle but also to quell their insubordination.

Another possibility for early film history is to argue that films of this period are not marginal for later cinema but central to it precisely because of their ability to combine the production and dissemination of popular entertainment on an unprecedented scale with the radical potential of intense artistic experimentation. Seen in this way, early cinema poses a challenge for distinctions that may seem familiar today but that emerged and consolidated only in later periods—distinctions such as those between high and low cinema, between self-reflection and realism, or between commercial and art-house cinema. Early cinema also questions the neo-Aristotelian focus on storytelling over spectacle that has informed much of the scholarly work on later cinema. In fact one can go a step further to argue that the potential of cinema as it emerged before 1914 has never been fully realized by the bifurcations of later cinema between commercial and art-house, between cinema as an art form and cinema as an industry.

What was that potential? At a very basic level it has to do with a profound reconceptualization of representation as a result of the emergence of new

audio-visual technologies for the storage, transmission and retrieval of knowledge. Seen as a medium rather than as an art form or industry (Ligensa and Kreimeier 2009; Albera and Tortajada 2010), film encapsulates an epistemic shift in the way the world, including antiquity, is perceived and understood, a shift that needs to be related to the emergence around 1900 or soon after of new disciplines including psychoanalysis, archaeology and anthropology, but also of new artistic movements such as modernism.

As the title of Méliès' *Jupiter's Thunderbolts* suggests, the true protagonist of the film is not Jupiter himself but his thunderbolts. Newly forged by Vulcan, they give him the thrill and excitement of power, but they also burn his hands, go off prematurely, and eventually force him out of the film frame. The thunderbolts prove a power superior even to the father of the gods himself, seizing control over the narrative and title of the film. As a film producer, director and actor, Jupiter may be able to assert the superiority of film over traditional arts but he fails to control the raw power of the technical objects at his disposal and the spectacle they create. The contrast between the antiquity of the first wizard of cinema and the antiquity of Karl Marx is illuminating. For Marx, alienation in modernity is understood as separation from the classical past and its mythologies: "What chance has Vulcan against Roberts & Co., Jupiter against the lightning-rod and Hermes against the Crédit Mobilier? All mythology overcomes and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in the imagination and by the imagination; it therefore vanishes with the advent of real mastery over them" (Marx 1993, 110). For Méliès, on the other hand, classical mythology and the imagination are not made irrelevant in the modern world. Rather, they are radically reconfigured in ways that help the spectator play out and perhaps work through the shocks of modernity, shocks related to the miraculous and uncanny force of an increasingly technologized environment and the ensuing complexities of the human condition within it.

Which Antiquity?

Greece and Rome appear in a whole range of popular film genres of this period: fiction films such as fantasy films, optical trick films, comedies, historical dramas, animation and melodramas, but also non-fiction films such as travelogues, dance films, and filmed theater. Geographically, the majority of these films come from just three powerhouses of early film production, USA, Italy and France, but circulate widely around the globe: the scattering of surviving film prints in collections from Sao Paolo to Tokyo is sometimes directly related to the complex routes of early film distribution. Thematically,

the films of this period engage with Greece and Rome in a range of ways. Some of them relate to specific historical individuals (*A Modern Sappho*, 1905, *Julius Caesar*, 1908, *Nero* 1909, *The Death of Socrates*, 1909, *Cleopatra*, 1910), literary or artistic works (*An Artist's Dream*, 1897, *The Island of Calypso: Ulysses and the Giant Polyphemus*, 1905, *Ben-Hur*, 1907, *The Return of Ulysses*, 1908, *Lysistrata*, 1910) or classical locations (*A Trip to Greece*, 1908, *Ancient Rome*, 1909). Many films feature mythological characters and stories which are not directly linked to specific textual or visual narratives but which nevertheless have strong links to Greece and Rome: Hercules, Prometheus, Pygmalion, Orpheus, Narcissus, King Midas, the Minotaur. A third group of films features more loose connections to the Greco-Roman world, with the linguistic and pictorial identity of that world confined to isolated signs related to classical or classicizing architecture (film design, outdoor filming in Mediterranean-style gardens, filming on location in archaeological sites), costumes (white robes for women or tunics for men), or names. For instance, in some of the earliest film dances ever produced such as *Cupid and Psyche* (1897), *Neptune's Daughters* (1900), and *A Nymph of the Waves* (1900), there is very little other than the film title itself that allows us to draw a firm link between the mixture of dancing styles displayed on the screen (ballet and variety-style dancing) and the world of classical antiquity.

Some of the differences in the cinematic reception of Greece and Rome that become prominent in later periods (especially after the Second World War) are not totally absent from this period: Rome has a more distinct visual and thematic identity associated with the dramas of history; Greece is more malleable and more clearly linked to mythology and literary adaptations. Rome has associations with imperial politics, urbanism and Christianity; Greece has more to do with the imagination. Rome is made relevant to the modern world through analogy; Greece through symbolism. For instance, one could argue that the divide between the historical dramas of Rome and a Greece associated with the fantastical can be mapped onto the dichotomy between documentary realism and fictional fantasy as it emerges out of the contrasting cinematic styles of Lumière and Méliès. At the same time, however, there is a strong sense in which the films of this early period engage with Greece and Rome not so much as historically and symbolically distinct entities but as interrelated and often indistinct parts of a rich and vibrant classical tradition. Arguably, this is true for popular culture more broadly, including later types of cinema as well. The drive for early films to situate themselves squarely within the culture of classicism, first as newcomers and competitors with other arts but also, especially towards the 1910s, as its custodians, is at least as strong as any desire to mark categorical distinctions

within that culture. The dominant mode of the period is an irreverent process of aesthetic and cultural hybridity and homogenization of Greece and Rome, with little interest in issues of accuracy and fidelity towards sources or in distinctions between different eras, cultures, and styles. This goes hand in hand with a similarly strong interest in the ways in which classicism is opposed to, and often threatened by, the orientalism of Babylon, the Middle East and Pharaonic Egypt (Michelakis and Wyke 2013: 12–14).

This process of hybridity and homogenization operates simultaneously at a cultural level and at a narrative and aesthetic level and needs to be connected to film as a "total art form" (in the manner of Wagner's opera). But for the purposes of this chapter it also needs to be connected to film as a "total medium" encapsulating a new episteme. The emergence of cinema creates new possibilities for the representation and conceptualization of Greece and Rome. Text-based and image-based models of antiquity are suddenly replaced by an embodied antiquity in motion. From a film-historical point of view, this turn to antiquity can be seen as a pragmatic ploy for respectability and artistic legitimation on the part of early cinema and its nineteenth-century predecessors. But from an epistemological point of view, this mode of referencing classical antiquity has far-reaching implications for the way in which Greco-Roman antiquity itself is perceived as the object of knowledge and perception around 1900. Cultures previously perceived as remote and inaccessible, the object of contemplation from a distance or the product of the imagination, are suddenly transformed into a vivid but fleeting reality to be experienced through the senses. Film makes possible the generation of new modes of perception and thought in modernity within which Greece and Rome become not only more vivid, but also more complex, dynamic, and enigmatic. This is not the first time that Greece and Rome enter modern popular culture (nineteenth-century photography, the novel, theatre and opera are important predecessors of cinema in this respect), but it is arguably the first time that they enter the modern imagination so pervasively across social, cultural and geographical boundaries.

Greco-Roman antiquity is important during this period primarily in terms of film form and content: plot, set design, costumes, acting styles, sound, and so on. Its bearing on issues of film genre, film theory and cinema architecture is very limited until around 1910. This is not surprising in view of the fact that cinema itself does not emerge as an institution with regulated production, exhibition and distribution practices and as an art form with its own aesthetic and narrative strategies until around this time. While the so-called "classical" film narrative that begins to consolidate in the late 1910s acquires its name as a result of an investment in classicizing terminology of film critics of later generations (Williams 2000), it is nevertheless entirely consistent

with the classicizing drive that manifests itself in various other ways from around 1910: film genres such as epic emerge and define their identity and generic parameters through engagement with ancient literary epics (Michelakis 2013b), the first screenwriting manuals invite reflection on film narrative through a return to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the first cinema palaces use neoclassical architecture, and the first theoretical writings on cinema create an archaeology of "writing in movement" that links cinema to ancient vase paintings, Greek tragedy, and other classical art forms (Michelakis 2013a, 1–3 and 111–117).

Spectatorship

In mainstream commercial cinema the spectator is often perceived as being immersed in the action in the way that Roland Barthes describes for the widescreen films of the 1950s:

> I am on an enormous balcony, I move effortlessly within the field's range, I freely pick out what interests me, in a word I begin to be surrounded [...] here I am, no longer under the image but in front of it, in the middle of it, separated from it by this ideal distance, necessary to creation, which is no longer that of the glance but that of the arm's reach [...] the balcony of History is ready. What remains to be seen is what we'll be shown there. (Barthes 1954)

The "balcony of history" is a concept that Barthes formulates in the 1950s in response to the novelty of CinemaScope, but at a fundamental level it describes a viewing experience that can be associated with both later and earlier types of cinema, including the first film epics of the 1910s. For instance in *The Fall of Troy* (1910) the spectator is invited to look at the burning city of Troy from the vantage point of Helen and Paris who stand on a balcony of the royal palace. The balcony of history gives unmediated access to past events as they unfold, but it also provides a safe distance from them, distance that makes possible to gain eyewitness knowledge of history for pleasure and education. In many ways Roland Barthes' balcony of history points towards the hugely influential (even if reductive and monolithic) scopophilic model of spectatorship advanced to describe the spectator of mainstream cinema (Mulvey 1989). Hidden in a darkened space, the spectator enjoys the spectacle on the screen voyeuristically. The spectacle itself stimulates voyeurism with the help of a narrative driven by suspense, by the promise of revealing what is constantly deferred.

A persistent narrative about early cinema spectatorship focuses on a very different kind of spectator, the naïve spectator who runs away in panic from

the fast-approaching train on the screen or who runs towards the screen in an attempt to save the heroine in danger. It may well be that such naïve spectators never really existed except perhaps as urban myths fuelled by cinema's own desire for attention-seeking publicity (Elsaesser 2009: 14–17). However the films themselves suggest modes of embodied viewing and modes of narrating which are very different from those associated with Barthes' balcony of history. Early spectators may often be cast in the role of the voyeur but equally often they are addressed in a direct manner. The spectacle on the screen is not based on a cause-and-effect narrative, where everything moves towards a resolution that holds the key to the questions raised by the plot. Rather, it is based on a succession of visually powerful scenes which are only loosely connected with one another, resulting in what Aristotle in the *Poetics* or modern critics of action movies would summarily condemn as "episodic plot." Early cinema concentrates on moments of exciting spectacle of interest in themselves that aim to give the spectator pleasure through the quick arousal and satisfaction of curiosity. The early spectator is not just an eyewitness but someone who is complicit to this spectacle, who participates in it and experiences it through shocks and thrills. One question is at whose expense are the various tricks played—there are important issues here of gender, class and ethnicity. Another question is whether the pleasure derived from such films is "mere fun" or whether an aesthetic of shocks and thrills has more profound implications for how cinema relates to modern life as a symptom or as a reaction to it. While a more systematic examination of early cinema spectatorship might focus on broader issues of social identity as they interact with exhibition practices (Cooper 2005), the discussion that follows concentrates on two examples of how spectatorial responses are anticipated by early film narrative modes of address.

Georges Hatot's *Nero Testing Poison on Slaves* (*Néron essayant des poisons sur des esclaves*) was produced in 1897. In a narrative that is less than a minute long, slaves are brought before Nero's throne and are made to drink poisons, while Nero himself observes with intense interest their agony and death at his feet. The film consists of a single shot, with a static camera. No editing is involved in it, although careful prefilmic preparation is required for the sets, props, costumes, and the movement of the actors in and out of the frame. The issue of how violence is depicted on screen and why antiquity offers legitimate ground for the testing of the limits of acceptability and of the boundaries of censorship shows no sign of dying out in the age of video games and cable television. In that respect, and for all its simplicity, the film can be situated at the origins of a persistent feature of cinema's fascination with antiquity. The question of what kind of take the film offers on the display of violence (is it about violence or is it about display? Does it lead

to a critique or to a celebration of violence?) cannot be addressed without considering its engagement with previous representation of the same topic in the visual and performance arts or the broader debate about artistic attitudes towards pain and death that can be traced back to Lessing in the eighteenth century and to Plato in antiquity. The film can be read as a reductive take on the tragic story of the poisoner Locusta stripped down to a single scene devoid of narrative context. But, while bodily mutilation and violent shape-shifting are common themes in the magic trick films of this period, what we have here is a more realistic depiction of suffering closer to morbid forms of entertainment associated with the fairground, including non-fiction films featuring public executions and the electrocution of animals. As the emperor leans over and looks intensely at the agonizing death of the poisoned slaves, his mastery and control over the spectacle goes hand in hand with his bodily re-enactment of the victims' convulsions of pain. The film satisfies a curiosity not by suspense but by surprise. Like Nero, the spectator can experience the agonizing pain of the slaves again and again, at will, but not without impulsive bodily reactions that replicate the violent juxtaposition between life and death, presence and absence, power and submission as it is played out on the screen.

Another interesting example for how spectatorship works in early cinema is provided by George Méliès' *Pygmalion and Galatea* (*Pygmalion et Galathée*, 1898). As the online catalogue of the American Film Institute puts it, the film features Méliès as Pygmalion "at work in his studio on the statue of Galatea, who, on being completed, comes to life. He attempts to clasp her to his arms, when the bust leaves the body and crossing the room mocks at him standing with the lower portion of her body in his hands." Like numerous other films of this period, it features a male creator and a female statue, raising issues about the objectification of female beauty, the male-dominated world of artistic creativity and the relation between the animate and the inanimate. The film also draws on the popularity of the Pygmalion myth, animated statues, and the sculptural ideal in tableaux vivants, pose plastiques and popular theatre (Nead 2007: 45–104; Hersey 2009; Marshall 1998; Macintosh 2013). But whereas for most of these art forms the appeal of the story lies in the desire for animation and the transformative moment of transition from stone to flesh, in this film there is no room to develop anticipation or to reflect on the emotional effects of the miraculous transformation. Pygmalion runs hopelessly behind Galatea's animated statue and seeks in vain to clasp her in his arms, to regain control over his creation through haptic perception. The film turns the objectification of feminine beauty and the aestheticization of matter as a project of male desire and creativity to something that has its own agency and leaves no room for contemplation. If,

as Nead argues, "the dream of motion haunts the visual arts from the classical period to the present day" (2007, 45), the film shows how frenetic and erratic motion can be associated with the stirring up and frustration of desire, with disbelief and disorientation. If we should see in this film "the story of the invention of cinema itself," with cinema, like the statue of Galatea, being a descendant of the automata of the Enlightenment (Wood 2002: 189), the film associates the life-like not only with the wondrous but also with the uncanny (Marcus 2007). What is more, it airs anxieties about the failure to separate between real life and the lifelike, the natural and the artificial, in a manner that keeps Pygmalion, the object of ridicule, at a distance from the spectator. Pygmalion, like other naïve characters of early cinema, is "'trapped' in the superabundance of data" of early cinema for the benefit of the spectator: in the age of mechanical reproduction and of commodity fetishism, proximity and possession come to be redefined not in tactile terms but in visual terms. Cinema shows spectators how not to behave, or as Elsaesser puts it "in the cinema—as in the modern world of urban display and self-display—the rule is 'you may look, but you may not touch'" (2009, 16).

Color

The oscillation between and within different types of polychromy and monochromy informs cinematic representations of antiquity throughout cinema's history. If mainstream film genres of classical Hollywood celebrate their classicism through thematic and formal links with neo-classical discourses about beauty in glorious black and white, sword and sandal movies celebrate countercultural values through an aesthetic of intense colors associated with the foreign, the feminine and the vulgar. If Hollywood Technicolor seeks to remain subdued and diegetically motivated, experimentation with film color outside Hollywood goes for a stylization based on sensuous colors explicitly situated within larger intermedial contexts. For the purposes of this chapter, the most interesting moments in the cinematic history of color are those where polychromy and monochromy encounter each other within the space of the same film narrative. For instance, in Zack Snyder's *300* (2006) there is a sharp juxtaposition between the saturated colors of orientalizing excess and the sepia monochromy of the Greek male body that stands for a broader clash of civilizations. In Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004) the classicizing monochromy of white statues and architecture is once again set in opposition to the monumentality and sensual allure of orientalizing excess, though in this case the possibility of a reconciliation between the two is also raised. In Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), two types of monochromy fight against each other: the

greyscale monochromy of imperial power clashes against the sepia monochromy of personal memory before they both give way to a republic of colors, a republic for which the film's protagonist fights to the death. This color coding of distinct cultural and ideological takes on antiquity does not confine itself only to the digital age. In Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963), for instance, a polemical return to the aesthetic dissonance of ancient sculptural polychromy highlights color as an external "supplement" and as an autonomous means of expression contributing "to the dissolution of a fixed perspective" (Hanssen 2006: 132).

One of the most fascinating chapters in this history of oscillation between monochromy and polychromy in cinematic representations of classical antiquity comes from the silent era. Many of the films on Greece and Rome produced in the first two decades of cinema were made with the help of early color techniques ranging from toning and tinting to kinemacolor, demonstrating the link between the symbolic value of antiquity and the higher production and exhibition costs of film seeking to appeal to the middle classes. For the purposes of this chapter I want to concentrate on a small selection of color films produced by the French companies Pathé and Gaumont, and more specifically on the stencil effects used in these films, for three reasons. First, because the encounter between polychromy and monochromy in this body of films appears as an aesthetic norm, informing the composition of their narrative at all levels. Second, because this encounter of different attitudes towards color does not always manifest itself in terms of an ideological clash but often holds the promise of a synthesis. And third, because this body of films comes at a significant historical juncture, just before an aesthetic of monochromy prevails in a classicizing cinema coming of age but also across the arts, as modernism revisits and redefines the foundations of classical art.

The earliest among the films I want to discuss is one of the very last *Serpentine Dance* films to be made in the first decade of cinema, produced by Pathé in 1905 (often identified erroneously as "Loie Fuller" or descriptively as "Serpentine Dance by imitator of Loie Fuller"). The film begins with a bat flying through the air against the backdrop of a classical temple and a rural landscape. As soon as it lands on the ground, it is transformed into a female dancer waving "her voluminous costume-like wings" in the style of the American pioneer of modern dance Loie Fuller (see Figure 1.1). After two minutes of constant changes of shape and color, what enters the frame as a dark green bat finally vanishes as a colorful tornado, leaving behind an empty space. At one level, the film provides us with competing models for thinking about Greece, setting up a contrast between greyscale and static images in the background and a colorful movement that "obscures and dissolves the [human] body" in the foreground (Brannigan 2011: 23).

Figure 1.1 Imitator of American modern dance pioneer Loie Fuller in "Serpentine Dance" film produced by Pathé, France, in 1905. Screen capture from DVD. © British Film Institute, 2012. For the tinting, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dda-BXNvVkQ

Seen in this way, an intermedial clash is being dramatized here, with cinema siding with the performing arts of dance and vaudeville against the visual arts of painting and architecture. But to cast this dynamic juxtaposition of art forms and colors only in terms of a clash would be to underestimate the significance of bringing them together in the first instance. The echoes of Greek antiquity were always present in Loie Fuller's technological spectacles of movement and light, both in the voluptuousness and mysticism of her movements and in the whiteness of her robes (Albright 2007). But, to my knowledge, this is the only dance film inspired by her choreographic work that brings out the connection of that work with classical Greece in its use of sets. The greyscale sets in the background, no less than the colorful dancer in the foreground, contribute to the same process of abstraction whereby the visual identity of Greece is reduced to isolated signs such as the temple, the robe, the harmony between (wo)man and nature. Seen in this way, the coexistence of monochromy and polychromy in this film does not seek to create hierarchies between the different strands of the classical tradition on which it draws but to break them down and reassemble them as a new type of spectacle in which they are inseparable.

In *Roman Orgy* (*L'orgie romain*), directed by Louis Feuillade for Gaumont in 1911, the effeminate emperor Heliogabalus appears to be in full control of the film's color palette just as he is in full control of the narrative. Scene after scene, his clothes have as many hues as the clothes of all the other characters put together. As the narrative progresses, this flamboyant spectacle of absolute power and excess is set up in opposition to the forces of order and reason that ultimately prevail. For instance, one of the orgies he organizes takes place under the watchful eye of Emperor Augustus, whose white marble statue stands right in the middle of the composition. The same contrast appears in a later scene, where Heliogabalus, pursued by the Praetorian Guard, hides in a room dominated by the solemn gaze of another monochrome marble bust. What we have here is a political and moral reading, if there is one, of monochromy and polychromy as contrasting forms of power: one of them associated with decadence, the other with law and order. Given the clarity of this juxtaposition, the final scene where the Praetorian Guard punishes the transgressive emperor comes as a surprise. All members of the guard wear colorful armor that competes in intensity with the clothes worn by Heliogabalus himself (Figure 1.2). The off-screen decapitation of the tyrant and the momentary glimpse of his severed head suggest that the proliferation of color in this final scene is not dissonant with a search for narrative closure. The progressive movement of the narrative towards order is depicted against the canvas of a history where the colorful pleasures of shock and horror offer enduring continuities.

Another useful example of the interaction between monochromy and polychromy can be found in the mythological adaptation entitled *The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche* (*Le marriage de l'amour*), produced by Pathé, probably in 1913. In the first scene, all characters appear in colored costumes against a similarly colored background representing a palace hall. The only character that stands out is the film's female protagonist, played by the dancer and actress Stacia Napierkowska, whose white dress highlights her statuesque beauty but also underscores her loneliness and isolation. The following scene features a divine assembly in which Venus and her companions are all dressed in white, against the subdued colors of the idyllic woodland that surrounds them. This scene reinforces the neoclassical associations of the white color with timeless beauty, but at the same time it comes across as lifeless and lacking in depth when compared to the world of the mortal characters of the previous scene. In the final scene, Psyche is seduced by Cupid in a sequence featuring a visual feast of food-bearing spirits that appear out of thin air, statues, flowers, tiger skin rugs on the floor, and other rich ornaments. This visual feast seeks to seduce the spectator in the way it seduces Psyche, not least by setting on display some of the "special effects of the fairy

Figure 1.2 The emperor Heliogabalus about to be killed by the Praetorian Guard in the final scene of Louis Feuillade's *Roman Orgy* (*L'orgie romain*, France, 1911). Screen capture from digital copy of the print held at the EYE Film Institute in Amsterdam. For the tinting, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYOjJvhc8Vc

and trick genres" (Yumibe 2012, 126). However, none of the spectacular items at the foreground of the composition appears in color. Colors are reserved only for the two characters of Psyche and Cupid themselves in the middle ground and the curtains and columns opening on to a garden in the background. What we have here is in many ways the reverse of what we found in the *Serpentine Dance* of 1905. Color appears to be the norm against which the divine, the miraculous, and the exotic are highlighted in black and white.

Conclusion

The small and diverse sample of films discussed above allows us to trace a development in the use of film color from novelty to accepted norm within a relatively short period of intense artistic and technological experimentation with a specific coloring technique. More important than that, though, the

selective and partial application of color associated with stenciling allows reflection on larger debates about polychromy and monochromy. Each film frame opens up a different range of possibilities for the configuration of the relation between color and black and white. As well as mapping this diversity onto the rise and fall of a specific coloring technique in a specific national context, we may also use it as a starting point for thinking about the larger history of color in modernity as a history of discontinuous technological practices resonating with persistent aesthetic tropes.

Color and spectatorship are by no means the only two topics through which a discussion about Greece and Rome in early cinema might be undertaken. This chapter has touched on a number of other issues that relate to developments in film narrative and style, and to relations with other art forms and media. Various other topics could have been included, for instance under the general heading of modes of production, distribution and exhibition one could discuss sound, early cinema architecture, national traditions and cultural and socioeconomic contexts. While early cinema remains one of the most under-researched areas of the encounter between cinema and Greco-Roman antiquity, it raises historiographical, methodological and theoretical issues that can help challenge, or at least de-emphasize, teleological or essentialist approaches to cinema, popular distinctions between high art and popular culture or between commercial and art-house cinema, and familiar modes of film analysis including auteurism, stardom and genre criticism. Perhaps more importantly, it provides a deeper understanding of film and its contribution to the modern reception of Greece and Rome, not only in terms of cinema as an art form or industry but also in terms of film as a medium with the power to transform the types of knowledge that can be recorded and disseminated and the ways in which subjectivity is constructed in modernity.

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FURTHER READING

Research on the reception of Greece and Rome in early cinema is complicated by the difficulty of accessing films and other archival materials of this period. Many early films exist only in film prints held in film archives and are available for viewing either onsite using flatbed facilities or in one-off screenings in specialized film festivals. However, this is a fast-changing research landscape, with a relatively steady flow of films being restored and digitized each year for release on DVD or through online video streaming. While such digital modes of viewing provide unrivalled access to and control over the filmic narrative, they nevertheless lack the performative dimensions, perceptual pleasures, and cognitive challenges of collective viewing of filmstrips projected on the large screen with live musical accompaniment. So far there has been no systematic attempt to identify which films of this period are available commercially or through online streaming. The single most authoritative source for locating film prints in film archives is the subscription-based and slightly out-of-date database "Treasures from the Film Archives" of the International Federation of Film Archives. The identification and collection of materials around films of this period requires extensive archival research. A good starting point is the open access Media History Digital Library (http://mediahistoryproject.org/) and the online catalogues of film archives, libraries, and other institutions such as the American Film Institute, the British Film Institute, the French Cinematheque, and the Library of Congress. An extensive list of films related to Greece and Rome which is particularly helpful for early cinema can be found in Dumont 2013. Basic information about many of these films can also be found in the Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com/). Broad reference works on early cinema include Burch 1990, Elsaesser and Barker 1990, Grieveson and Krämer 2004, Abel 2005, Gaudreault 2011 and Gaudreault, Dulac and Hidalgo 2012. So far, the only collection of articles devoted exclusively to silent cinema and the Greco-Roman world is Michelakis and Wyke 2013. On the related fields of Pharaonic Egypt, the Bible and Shakespeare in silent cinema see respectively the works by Lant 1992, Shepherd 2013 and Buchanan 2011.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Creation of the Epic: Italian Silent Film to 1915

Irmbert Schenk

An Outline of Italy's Social and Ideological History

The unification of Italy as a nation state was achieved in 1861 under the auspices of the Kingdom of Piedmont. The capital of Rome, replacing the provisional capital at Florence, was only wrested from the Papal States by military force ten years later (an event depicted in *La presa di Roma*, the first Italian feature film, in 1905). The constitutional form of the state was a monarchy, not the republic which the civilian forces of the Risorgimento and revolutionaries of 1848 had been striving for. At the same time as unification, a division of the country arose: the unequal social development of northern and southern Italy. While the north embraced industrialization from 1880 on (relatively late in comparison with international trends), in the south, the almost exclusively rural economy stagnated with low productivity. This unequal development also holds for the era of economic development and euphoria at the turn of the century, when protectionism supporting industry further harmed the rural sector: this quickly allowed contemporary writers on the *Questione meridionale* (the "southern question," as it was known after 1901) to speak about the south as a colonial market.

Here I will consider a few statistics. As late as 1914 in Italy, 55 percent of the population was working in agriculture with only 28 percent in industry

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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(largely distributed across small enterprises). As a result, the 87 percent increase in production in the industrial sector between 1901 and 1913 was much higher than the European average. The social effects, that is, the spread of poverty and misery especially in the south and in many rural areas, become clearer if one considers that between 1909 and 1913 the average annual number of emigrants was 650,000 out of a total population of 36 million. Although underdeveloped overall, the education system in the south was also particularly underfunded. In 1911, when universal suffrage was extended to all men over thirty, half the population was still estimated to be illiterate (Villari 1977; Romeo 1978; Paci 1981; Fissore and Meinardi 1988; Carocci 1990; Procacci 1993; Mack Smith 1997; Romano and Vivanti 1999).

The manifestations of economic and social change unfold in various ways, but most important for the context of mass media are the effects on people's psychosocial identity that stem from this disparity in societal formation. On the one hand, the disparity is revealed in a peasant agrarian lifestyle, itself the product of the semi-feudal landed estates, the Church's power of sanction and a parasitic administration, and on the other hand, in urban living conditions, subject to capitalistic industrialization and modernization. These facts lead to the impression that the normative demands of the value systems of comparable social groups were differently perceived. A second assumption, however, appears to me to be more significant: that the process nevertheless set out the contradictions for everyone and that the outcome shaped the social and historical awareness of the populace, in a similar manner to the way in which the national identity of society as a whole is created by the conception of the individual. But how could this identity be shaped with such strong tension at the time of unification and the increase in contradictions during the period of the development of the national state?

The film historian Georges Sadoul (1973: III.1, 207) credits the background to the origin of the film *Cabiria*, dealing with the Punic Wars of ancient Rome, to Italy's successful colonial war of conquest in Libya in 1911–12. This act of Italian colonial imperialism, however, had as its prehistory a much less successful precedent in Eritrea and Somalia after 1885 and in the catastrophic defeat at Adua in 1896 during the first attempt to conquer Abyssinia (the war in Abyssinia in 1935–6 was, for Fascism, a sequel with the aim of "setting things right").

Throughout all these enterprises a central term of propaganda shows up: the notion of *mare nostrum*, the Mediterranean belonging historically, geographically, climatically and culturally to Italy. This was not simply propaganda to gloss over foreign affairs failures or low international regard for Italy. More significantly, it was linked to a spectrum of diffuse ideology, intended to paper over the lack of a contemporary empirical basis for the

creation of a overarching national idea of history and society as well as the unbearable living conditions of many, as outlined above. By that, I mean a return to earlier periods of believed or real national, military and cultural grandeur, as much fictitious and rhetorical as ideologically effective: for example, the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and above all Roman antiquity or (for the south) Magna Graecia. This sworn declaration of a unity of historical identity between Latinity and Italianness, between Humanism and Christianity as the (infantile) view of (manly) strength became the central moment of the construction of contemporary unity and identity. The core textual and atmospheric elements of an ideology that is as much comprehensive as it is diffuse are focused in this declaration; they likewise appear as a widespread pedagogical theme in education and culture. The formalisms of Italian literature, for instance, give an indirect impression of this; these declarations are pointedly expressed in the nationalist pathos of a D'Annunzio or in Marinetti's glorifications of war and power (their use as stepping stones for Fascism being not merely rhetorical). Pompous Roman architecture, such as the Palace of Justice and the National Monument to Victor Emmanuel II, is from this era, which also saw the founding of periodicals such as *Mare Nostrum*, *La Grande Italia* and *L'Idea Nazionale*.

In cinema, however, this take on history became its own genre, in the epic and history films Italian cinema was producing (particularly up until 1915). The unique aesthetic of these films lies in their realistically depicted expansion of filmed space. This, combined with the "rhetoric" of scenery, mass movement and gesticulation, enabled the films to medially take on the aforementioned demands of diffuse ideology in Italy as well as deliver them. At the same time, they were meeting the spatial power fantasies and desires for historical myths of audiences around the world. Before the First World War, Italy had captured a large share of the international film market with these productions.

The Origins of Italian Film-making

As elsewhere, the formal written history of film-making begins in Italy in 1895, in fact on November 11, when Filoteo Alberini, an engineer at the Istituto Geografico Militare, patented a filming and projection machine in Florence. His *Kinetografo* worked in a similar fashion to the Lumière brothers' Cinématographe, but saw no practical use due to overpowering competition from the Lumières. The brothers' Cinématographe was not shown in Rome until 1896 (with a program announcing this as *fotografie animate*—"moving photographs"). Film production over the following ten years was

generally restricted to "real" subjects, that is, documentaries and current affairs films commissioned by or imitating the productions of the Lumières. The Milanese Italo Pacchioni can be regarded as a "national" pioneer in this field. With his brother Enrico, Pacchioni shot and projected films from 1896 onward with a homemade film-making device. The internationally famous quick-change artist Leopoldo Fregoli made films of his own variety numbers and occasionally also animated films after the fashion of Méliès. From 1898 to 1903, he showed the films under the trademark *Fregoligraph* as the fourth part of his show. He also had them shown as complete film programs to variety show audiences when he was absent.

The *caffé-concerto* and variety theater were the main venues for early silent movie distribution (especially imported films) in Italy. Up to ten films were generally incorporated into a program as a fifteen- to thirty-minute block. After 1904, the establishment of fixed cinemas in the cities accelerated (amidst the first expansion of the film industry with corresponding vertical labor divisions), and was complemented by playhouses doubling as cinemas in summer or during breaks in programming, and by the erection of open-air cinemas. The rise of the travelling carnival cinema did not have the same significance in Italy as it did in other European countries; due to topographical and social reasons, travelling cinemas largely appeared (particularly between 1903 and 1907) at carnivals and trade shows in northern Italy. This background of a cinema that was overall slow to develop may be why the middle classes in Italy were included in audiences, and theater practitioners and writers as workers, much earlier than elsewhere.

The first Italian feature film, the previously mentioned *La presa di Roma,* was filmed in 1905 by Alberini with the Roman company Alberini and Santoni, which he had just founded. In 1906, it changed its name to the long-lasting Cines. During the same period, around 1905 to 1907, further production companies emerged in Turin, Rome, Milan and Naples, which established the long-term geographical distribution of Italian film production. By the end of 1907, there were nine film production companies, replacing what had been until then artisanal or family producers. By 1915 there are said to have been eighty production companies; in 1907 500 cinemas were listed, in 1915 1,500 film theaters (Prolo 1951; Brunetta 1979; Sadoul 1973; Lizzani 1961; Bernardini 1981, 1982). Bernardini (1982: 22) doubts the number of cinemas given by Prolo; Brunetta, (1979: 57) speaks of fifty production companies in 1914.

These figures highlight the enormous, rapid development of the Italian film industry. However, this was hardly a systematic industry but rather an anarchic and speculative one composed of small operations with no

monopolistic concentration. The same holds for the heyday of the long historical and period drama films from 1912 to 1914.

This economic system, essentially unstable but flexible, enabled Italian cinema to come out of the international film industry crisis of 1908 to 1909 more quickly, despite the crisis being deepened in Italy by the internal economic slump, especially affecting new industrial branches such as automobile production. This was accomplished partly by the abandoning of films of one to two rolls and the ambitious lengthening of film durations (up to 4,500 meters for Pastrone's *Cabiria*),[1] and partly through the significance and gravity of the subject matter and objects portrayed in the feature films.[2] This led to the prototype of this "enlargement," the Italian "blockbuster" (costumed historical and period film), taking a leading international position. Unfortunately, the export boom necessary to finance the expensive epics, already in decline by 1914, collapsed completely when Italy entered the war on May 24, 1915. The extent to which this expansion may be attributed to Italy's sunlight, general climate, scenic and historical endowment and cheap workforce that could be employed in large numbers—all making for low-cost production conditions, as Jasset (1911) maintained (and which many other writers have since repeated)—remains open. What seems to me to be more influential is the huge number of Italian emigrants in Europe and the Americas, who may have constituted a large part of the impressive export audience. In the domestic market, the historical films spurred the incorporation of the middle classes into the audience, as much through the films' connection to academic ideological themes as through their ever more refined display of technical and aesthetic artistry in presentation.

One of the unique features of the development of Italian cinema should be accorded more than passing anecdotal reference. In the second phase of expansion after 1908, the fact that more and more members of the nobility were involved in business management and on boards of directors and trustees, is a striking expression of the precarious economic state of the production system.[3] That certainly promoted the influx of large amounts of speculative capital (mostly derived from real estate) and so enabled the production of ever more lengthy and expensive films. At the same time, however, it set up both in form and ideology a concentration on two genres: the epic historical and period drama films, with their appeals to nationalistic emotion; and the middle-class and aristocratic salon dramas, with their passions that were as much decadent as they were exquisite. The *divismo* of Italian silent film particularly took hold through the latter, especially in the form of the female divas, who appear as the femme fatales of the films (and objects of desire for the blue-blooded company directors and producers).[4] They brought sexuality (different from the coarseness of lowbrow comedies

and melodramas) into the cinema in the glamorous form of eroticism and sex that is still dominant today.

Any overview of the main genres of early Italian silent film can only be rather superficial. Through the whole period we consistently find documentary and current affairs films, sometimes widely distributed. During and after the one-roll film period, sentimental "sensational dramas" or melodramas also appeared in Italy, often reworking formulas from popular literature (e.g., serial novels, often of French origin) and subjects of opera (Verdi, Puccini, Donizetti, Rossini). Throughout this period there were also acrobatic, crime, adventure and gangster films (with their popular chase scenes); in addition there were always the *comiche*—comedies—as the conclusion of a program of many short films of various genres.[5] In the context of the epic historical and costume films, the extraordinarily numerous popularizing films of Italian and European classical literature (from Dante to Shakespeare and Schiller) must be mentioned, films which frequently had the appearance of historical period dramas. Inspired by Gabriele D'Annunzio's drama and rhetoric (of which fifteen works were filmed), there were also dramas playing out exalted emotions in the refined milieu of "high society," mostly in the villas and salons of the aristocracy and rich bourgeoisie—the previously mentioned "cinema in frac" (cinema in white tie) in which the divas exhibited themselves. This group was rounded out by "*commedia brillante*," in the spirit of the boulevard theater, emerging at around the same time. The last two categories, like the films with historical motifs, were given preference in the cinema of Fascist Italy; they became increasingly characterized by interior scenes under artificial light, and the use of close-ups grew, placing the stars in the foreground.

The number of films that give a natural, realistic depiction of contemporary affairs is small. Such films, in which the subaltern classes also appear as subjects rather than simply masses of extras, were modeled on the patterns of literary and theatrical *verismo*, particularly Neapolitan popular theater. Notable works of this genre are Nino Martoglio's *Sperduti nel buio* (Morgana Films, 1914, adapted from Roberto Bracco's play) and Gustava Serena's *Assunta Spina* (Caesar Film, 1915, adapted from the play by Salvatore Di Giacomo). *Sperduti nel buio* in particular was supposedly influential in the development of filmic neo-realism as a consequence of its screening at the film school in Rome by Umberto Barbaro at the end of the 1930s.

Peplum: Historical and Epic Films

Alberini's 1905 film *La presa di Roma* (sometimes also called *La breccia di Porta Pia*) founded not only Italian feature film production but also the genre of historical film. Made for the 35th anniversary of the historic event,

it dealt with the victorious entrance of the forces of King Victor Emmanuel into papal Rome on September 9, 1879, effectively concluding the unification of Italy. A contemporary newspaper stressed the "grandiose historical reconstruction" (Lizzani 1961: 5), in which the film-makers had paid attention to every detail and whose scenes, thanks to the War Office, were enacted by real soldiers. The 250-meter film was largely shot outdoors. It shows soldiers in crowd scenes, already with occasional vertical movement in depth of field, parallel or slightly diagonal to the camera axis. These chronologically ordered "seven tableaux" (Jasset 1911) are self-contained and are only given significance and connected to each other by intertitles. In form and content, the film laid the building blocks for the elements of the historical epic films of Italian cinema –also ideologically, as the concluding national "apotheosis" naïvely illustrates.

The subject matter of these historical costume films was sometimes taken from high literature (e.g., Dante, Tasso, Manzoni), but more often featured figures and events from the area of popular mythology using a contemporary frame of reference; their treatment in popular literature could also serve as a model (e.g., Sienkiewicz's novel for *Quo Vadis?* or Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 novel for *Pompei*). Favored figures included Nero, Caesar, Cleopatra, Garibaldi, Napoleon, Christ and the Borgia, Ferrara and Médici families.

When Luigi Maggi's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (Ambrosio Co., 1908) first became a worldwide success, the genre developed enormously. Each film that followed was longer with more extravagant sets and extras. Hundreds of copies of the films were distributed nationally and internationally; after 1910 they were able for the first time to overcome the MPPC monopoly in the United States and ready the way for their successors up to *Cabiria* (the last pre-war success in the United States). As a result, it was not only the quantitative extravagance, the colossal and spectacular nature of the films, that increased, but the level of care and refinement of production values and all their trimmings was also raised continually—*Cabiria* is, to a certain extent, the final product and conclusion of this escalation.

Contemporary accounts of Ambrosio's 1908 Pompeii film gave particular attention to the Circus Maximus scene and the transition to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Later Pompeii films were measured against the impression these scenes created. The formula of a spectacular culmination to a plot and its cinematic expression, used here for the first time in historical films, was retained for decades. The quantitative and qualitative innovations in Luigi Maggi and Roberto Omegna's 366-meter film occasioned, as did its immediate successors, a significant aesthetic change for film history: the increasing autonomy of visualization in cinema as opposed to its dependence on literature and theater. Visualization here means, among other things, satisfying the desire to see large spaces and stories. In the process, a narrative form

unfolded that opened up the epic dimensions characteristic of popular myths for the depiction of space-time. Simultaneously, the cinematic innovation of this narrative form remained tied to a limitation, that is, the inevitable quality of the double discourse of these films: the dual functions of image narration and intertitles. The latter gave the former meaning that could not yet be achieved internally through shot choice and montage. Consequently, despite all the new depth of pictorial space, the pictorial view and scenes were narrated like static panels in a picture book, almost autonomous and usually related in a slow, linear-cut sequence. Mitry rightly speaks of illustration rather than narrative (Mitry 1967: 400). This stasis reflects the immobility of the camera's position and settings, the theatrical movements of the actors and (notwithstanding the introduction of depth and three-dimensionality in the image) the direction of the spectator's gaze towards the center. However, given that the stress on individual personalities and psychologies through close-ups was not yet common in the cinema of this time, this is of little significance.

Considering that Italian cinema strove like no other for exterior scenes, the suggestion of another paradox in historical films seems to me to be of greater significance. This is the contradiction between interior shots, which had the ability to show people's individuality, but which still laced the actors into a tight theatrical corset of two-dimensionality, and the new, cinematic breadth of natural and realistic spaces in the exterior shots, which allowed the actors to move in any direction within the frame, including three-dimensionally. Admittedly this was mainly used for crowd scenes and set dressing.

The extreme fascination that this Italian film genre held for audiences in Italy and around the world after 1908 should be considered. Alongside the inherent attraction of the medium itself, still as powerful as ever, and the novelty of the epic–visual breadth of narrative, this fascination largely lay in the films' realistic appearance, particularly in external shots. This effect of the size and scale of the scenery and performers seems to me to be rooted in having the new mass medium depict "real" people en masse amid "real" spaces and settings. This reference to reality primarily determined not only the magnetic appeal, but also the creation of meaning for the viewer, with all its ideological implications. It strengthened and gave form to existing but diffuse conceptions of history, consequently contributing structurally and more directly than most other genres to the general awareness of history and society.

In the following, a few examples from the huge number of historical costume films are laid out which shed light on milestones in the technical and aesthetic development of the genre and its acceptance by the public up until the First World War.

La caduta di Troia (1911) and *L'inferno* (1911), for example, traveled on the coat-tails of the previously mentioned Pompeii films. In his 605-meter film about Troy, Giovanni Pastrone, who had already tested the genre with *Julius Caesar* in 1909, gave a kind of scene-by-scene rendition of his epic sources, from the departure of Menelaus to the death of Paris. It was presented with the pretension of an "*epopea cinematografica*" and a few scenes already hinted at the later, even more epic elaborateness of film architecture (e.g., the Palace of Menelaus) and crowd scenes (800 extras). A reviewer at the New York premiere in 1911 said the film showed "to what heights of art the motion picture can rise," and went on to make particular note of the staging and how "a wonderfully deep perspective is maintained throughout" – a cinematic, rather than theatrical depth (*The New York Dramatic Mirror*. Vol. 65, no. 1687, April 19, 1911). Most impressive today is the "epically" broad narrative scope of the film, with which popular notions of Troy were translated into images, supplemented by (cinematic) tricks, like the appearance of Venus and the flying angels.

The contemporary criticism of what was then the longest film (1,300 meters), also produced in 1911, Francesco Bertolini and Adolfo Padovan's *L'inferno*, based on Dante, is interesting. A 1911 critic remarked that alongside all the "splendor of the scenery," the film lacked the "core elements of human emotion," that "the expressive strength" was missing perhaps even because of the "excess of staging" (*La Cine-Fono e Rivista Fono-Cinematografica*, no. 151, April 1, 1911). This evaluation, which came from a culturally conservative perspective, can be generalized to apply to most of these films: technical skill and grandeur were undeniably at the fore of producers' interests. However, we should not forget that the new mass medium and the material and historic events presented were "thrilling" in their own right, that is, dramatic and action-packed, and that the historical stories were charged both imaginatively and emotionally by their transmission. The "realistic" film portrayals both revoked and contemporized this inherent charge and, not least, were accessible to all social classes and levels of education.

In film historiography, the aesthetic value of *L'inferno*'s picture book "panels," said to have been based on Gustave Doré's Dante engravings, is particularly praised (Mitry 1967: 398). In my opinion, the integration of many trick shots in the style of Méliès (e.g., floating people and heads) into the realistic shots of naked people in natural rocky bays is impressive and creates a "poetic" mood seldom seen in early cinema, which itself complements Dante's poetry (descriptions of the Inferno circles and lines of verse make up the intertitles). Brunetta even sees an early "visual meter" developing here (Brunetta 1979: 143). Long horizontal pans are a striking feature of the film, which is divided into three parts and fifty-four scenes. The pans fulfill a

narrative function, specifically that of showing simultaneity and a cross-section of those in Hell and their punishments. The slow narrative rhythm helps the narrative style to appear childishly naïve and magical. *L'inferno* appears to Prolo "to be a realistically staged reproduction of life in the *trecento*" (Prolo 1951: 42). Most film historians consider it the most aesthetically sophisticated film of the time. Its success in meeting the expectations of an educated middle-class audience comes from the fact that the Neapolitan distributor Lombardo, after heavy investment in an advertising campaign, was able to hold the 1911 premieres in Naples, Milan and Rome for selected guests under the auspices of the national Dante society.

A second *Inferno* adaptation came out from Helios virtually at the same time, using less mysterious, but equally striking tricks to portray the journey through the air, specifically a kind of conveyor belt in the background coupled to a horizontal camera pan. Characteristic of this film are strong black and white effects (shots of caverns) and elements that are already verging towards Expressionism in certain painted backdrops. From the surviving fragments its aesthetic quality appears to me to be as significant as that of the Bertolini and Padovan film.

Enrico Guazzoni's *Agrippina* (Cines, 1911), with 2,000 extras, and *Gerusalemme liberata* (Cines, 1911, after Tasso), at over 1,000 meters in length, were also similarly successful at this time, both nationally and internationally. Maggi's *Il granatiere Roland* (cinematography: Vitrotti, screenplay: Frustra; 1911) revealed a new narrative technique. The story of the Napoleonic campaign in Russia is presented as the flashback of a weary returned soldier and takes place almost entirely outdoors in the snow.

Nero, clearly the most interesting figure for the folk transmission of Roman history and hence also for historical films, appears often, first as the title of the Ambrosio production *Nerone* in 1909 (direction: Arrigo Frusta and possibly also Roberto Omegna or Maggi; cinematography: Giovanni Vitrotti). Drawing strongly on "popular iconography" (Brunetta 1979: 142), as virtually all historical films do to differing degrees, it reproduced the famous episodes of Nero's life in self-contained scenes. The depiction vacillated particularly obviously between stage-like interior scenes and cinematically realistic exterior shots. The red tinting in the sequence of the burning of Rome made a particular impression on the spectators, as did the superimposing of Nero's nightmares onto the footage of his current actions. *L'odissea* by Francesco Bertolini and Adolfo Padovan (Milano Film, 1911) also presented a kind of folkloric saga borrowed from Homer. This film is 1,350 meters long and is noteworthy for its numerous tinted scenes and tricks as it relates the adventures of Odysseus.

Two of Luigi Maggi's historical films further developed a narrative technique he had already exercised in *Il granatiere Roland*. This technique was not really taken up again in Italy within this genre, but nevertheless became a general component of the language of film. The technique in question is the narrative method used in the films *Nozze d'oro* and *La lampada della nonna*, both produced by Ambrosio in 1911 and 1913 respectively from a script by Frusta. Here the historical scenes (the Risorgimento, especially exterior war shots) were inserted as flashbacks into the present situation of the first person narrator. In the first film, the grandparents tell their grandchildren (and the viewers) how they met during the wars against Austria. In the second film, as indicated by the title, the grandmother tells the story of her lamp, through which the same historical episodes of the Italian wars for independence from Austria are addressed. This strategy employed by Maggi, who had staged *verismo* plays as a theater director, created a human (and ideological) urgency in the thoroughly epic and large-scale historical scenes, unseen in any other film of this genre. Mitry considers this the beginning of film realism (Mitry 1967: 420).

From 1911/12, the constantly increasing monumentality and crowd scenes of historical films with their themes of (classical) Roman imperialism came to be closely linked with rising Italian nationalism and imperialism. These ideologies found expression in the Italo-Turkish War in Libya as well as in chauvinistic irredentism and interventionism immediately before the First World War, in which the most diverse political and social factions found common ground. However, the link between the historical films and the history of Italian ideologies, is seldom expressed overtly; rather, ideological content is usually structural and diffuse (already with an eye on the export market), yet is psychologically all the more effective for its depth. It is the striking visualization of (military) power and collective and individual strength, of the greatness and might of supposed ancestors, that intersects with the ideologemes present in the audience with regards to history and society, in order to boost the effect of the direct nationalistic propaganda.

In 1913, Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* (Cines, 1913) was the first of these huge films (2,250 meters, two hours' projection time) to enter the marketplace. In her Neapolitan newspaper, the (realistic) author Matilde Serao wrote of its premiere in Rome, "A spectacle never before seen. Cinema has never produced anything of the kind. Indeed, it is a world that Cines has reconstructed. A world of a kind of beauty that mesmerizes and leaves one terrified…" (Serao 1913). The Parisian premiere took place in Gaumont Palace, the world's largest cinema, with its own musical score by Jean Noguès and a 150-voice choir. In London the film played in the gigantic Albert Hall, transformed into a cinema. In New York, the Broadway dramatic theater, the

Astor, was turned into a cinema and opened triumphantly with *Quo Vadis?* (thus cinema made its debut on Broadway).

All the films discussed here conform to the model of the visualization of literature already outlined. *Quo Vadis?* is also a form of chapter for chapter illustration of the internationally popular 1896 novel by Sienkiewicz in this sense. The dimension of time is successfully represented, as previously, by a linear succession of scenes with intertitles giving plot information rather than through symbolic narrative composition within the film itself, so that individual scenes (to some degree compensating for this lack) are overloaded with plot and substance. Guazzoni, however, who like Mario Caserini had a background in painting, came up with a provisional dramaturgical solution (although the camera was still unmoving, holding the spectator's gaze statically and passively as in theater) by alternating crowd scenes with more intimate ones. The method involved altering the viewpoint during scene changes between long and medium-long shots (and infrequently medium close-ups). Often the depth of composition was accentuated by placing a group relevant to the story in the foreground and a (moving) mass of people in the background (or, for instance, flickering flames in the foreground and active people or crowds behind, as in the fire of Rome). Some authors claim that cinematic perspective, with its disengagement from the theatrical and illusionary, was first discovered with *Quo Vadis?* Mitry, however, believes that although Guazzoni made use of space he had not yet conquered it. He argues that the effect is not of space but of enlargement (Mitry 1967: 385). Whatever the case, the depth of composition enabled a (relatively) large number of narrative threads, with the dramatization of individual fates; that is, a stronger individualization and psychologization. There could be a contrast between individuals and crowds before there was a technical recording capability to pick out individuals and their faces, for example in the portrayal of the strongman Ursus fighting alone in the Circus Maximus with a huge crowd of people in the background, and the spectacular events of the chariot races, gladiator fights and Christian martyrs.[6]

Stylistically, like later Guazzoni films, *Quo Vadis?* is distinguished by a rigid construction of the spatial perspective. This is true of the sets and architecture, with massive classical or classicistic buildings that could sometimes be entered, but also of the processions of huge crowds through the shot, vertically or diagonally. When viewing, a subjective dissonance emerges through perceiving both the various "free" movements of people in the space and their nonetheless geometrically rigid choreography within the monumental set, a disturbance that may be caused by an immovability of the camera we are today unaccustomed to while simultaneously showing large movement within the picture. Camera movements only occur incidentally

during horizontal pans, for example in the circus scenes. Particularly striking is the scene in which Christians are thrown to the lions. Its threatening effect is derived not so much from the "reality" of the animals, but through the combination of fore- and background layering with a camera set deep in the circus ring at ground level or at most at the eye-level of the Christians.

In his following films, *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* (Cines, 1913) and *Cajus Julius Caesar* (Cines, 1914), Guazzoni gets by with fewer and fewer intertitles thanks to his skilled dramaturgical linking of scenes and field size formats. The crowd movements become even more marked, but also better integrated with the action. A clear indication of progress in the development of cinematic tools is the use of light in a fashion that is no longer merely theatrical; for example, in the reflection of flames on Cleopatra when she questions the oracle. Similar "cinematic" observations of light and other devices can be found in other films of this period.

Using a combination of the private and political, *Cajus Julius Caesar* narrates the course of Caesar's life from his unhappy love for Servilia, banishment and wars through to his return to Rome and eventual assassination. The plot, like the intertitles, draws on the usual school clichés about Caesar. In comparison with other films, the acting is much less theatrical and melodramatic, almost severe. The alternation between scenes and long/medium-long settings is again retained. The camera remains static; there are no close-ups. Scenery, costumes and props are carefully planned. Strikingly arranged, if a little draftsman-like, are the parades and processions of huge groups of soldiers on foot, on horseback, in horse-drawn chariots and ships. Guazzoni's principle of acquiring space through perspective (the third dimension of cinema) is thus made clear by the vertical and diagonal formation and movement of groups and crowds. During Caesar's entry into Rome and the enormous funeral procession after Caesar's death, the crowds march, under close surveillance of the camera, vertically through the whole shot, with the background delimited by a classical pillared structure. The programmatic nature of this method for creating depth becomes apparent when the ships of Pompey's fleet in Brindisi harbor pass through the picture crosswise and sometimes diagonally at different depths and in different directions. Contemporary viewers said they were particularly impressed by the quality of Caesar's murder (theatrically enacted), while nowadays the contrast between acting and illustration (the stereotyped conceptions of the murder familiar from school) appears more interesting.

Mario Caserini's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei*, which also appeared in cinemas in 1913, was Ambrosio's answer to *Quo Vadis?* (Caserini's film competed with an almost contemporaneous film and cheaper Pasquali production of the same name under the direction of Enrico Vidali, which premiered first).

Here, neither the depth of spatial perspective nor the dramaturgical cohesion between scenes is as well developed as in Guazzoni's films, yet in his introductory sequences, Caserini manages to convey an idyllic yet gentrified atmosphere (indebted to several clichés of antiquity) through bright diffused lighting and a slow pace. This in turn gives even greater contrast to the hectic closing scenes (the catastrophic eruption of the volcano and people chaotically fleeing and falling), evoking a vivid sense of menace and fear. At the climax of the plot, as Glaucus is being thrown to the lions in the circus, real footage of flowing lava, exploding fireworks, fleeing crowds and falling buildings is spliced into the scenes of the eruption of Vesuvius in (relatively) quick succession.

Although Sadoul claims otherwise (Sadoul 1973: 3, 206) the Pompeii film became a great national and international success. One example of this is the New York premiere at the opening of the most luxurious cinema of the day, the rebuilt Regent Theatre (now Off-Broadway) in December 1913. Samuel L. "Roxy" Rothapfel incorporated the cinema and the screening into part of the show with fountains, red velvet curtains, lighting effects, an organ and a large orchestra on stage and singers in side booths, along with specially arranged music with motifs from *Aida* and, for the chaos scenes, from *Lohengrin*. The detailed description of the evening also mentions that a toga-clad announcer appeared at various points and that the spectators behaved with decorum and appreciation: "they might have been at the opera" (*Motion Picture News*, December 6, 1913, p. 16).

Finally, a sub-genre of historical films is also worthy of note: films dealing with biblical themes, predominantly early Christian stories. In truth, such themes (persecution of the Christians, catacombs) also appear in many of the historical films set in ancient Rome. One example of the numerous films that treated religious themes directly is De Liguoro's *San Paolo* (Milano Film, 1910) which won the prize of the Milanese cardinal Ferrari at the Second International Film Competition in Milan in 1910. In scenes that are "naïvely" composed and assembled, the film moves from the Pauline conversion to the burning of Rome and Paul's imprisonment. Nino Oxilia's lavish *In hoc signo vinces!* (Savoia, 1913), set in the fourth century AD, was not a great hit with the public due to the gloominess of its scenes (befitting the historical situation described). *Christus* (Pasquali Film), a five-act, 2,000-meter film shot in Italy, Egypt and Palestine in 1914 by Count Giulio Antamoro, had a different reception and became one of the most screened Italian films in the world during the First World War. Having already made the largely neglected *I Maccabei* in 1911, Guazzoni, too, filmed *San Francesco il poverello d'Assisi*, also in 1911, and returned to biblical films in 1918 with *Fabiola*. The overlap with historical epics is quite fluid in *Christus* and *Fabiola*, so classification as

biblical (or hagiographical) films can only be derived from their thematic orientation. It is quite different with films such as *San Paolo* or *San Francesco*, where the directors wish to express a naïve faith through an intimate and simple presentation of characters and sets.

Cabiria as the Apex of Historical Films

In 1908 Giovanni Pastrone, not only the administrative director of Carlo Rossi & Co. but also a trained violinist and engineer, took over the Turin-based company together with Carlo Sciamengo, renaming it Itala Film (on Itala Film and Pastrone as producer, see Alovisio 2013). In 1912 he planned a great historical film and began preparations under the working title *Il romanzo delle fiamme*. His extraordinarily long and meticulous work on the film was completed at the start of 1914. After a huge advertising campaign, what was then the most expensive film ever made (one million gold lire) opened as *Cabiria* on April 18, 1914 in Turin and Milan and on April 22 in Rome.[7] Ildebrando Pizzetti composed a "Sinfonia del fuoco" for the Moloch sequence in the second episode, which, together with the music for the rest of the film by the conductor Manlio Mazza, was performed at the premiere by eighty musicians, seventy singers and a baritone. The shooting ratio of the film was 20,000 to 4,500 meters (which, depending on the actual projection speed, results in a running time of up to three and a quarter hours for the first release). In Italy and other countries, the author (usually synonymous with the director) was credited as Gabriele D'Annunzio; only later did Piero Fosco (Pastrone's pseudonym) appear as the director. The reviews in Italy and the United States, where the film had already been running since May 1914—even President Wilson watched *Cabiria* with his family in the White House in Washington in June 1914—were enthusiastic, although in parts of Europe the release was delayed because of the outbreak of the war. *Motography* regarded the film as the most spectacular of all time, the description of which evaded words, running the headline "World's Greatest Film is Screened. *Cabiria*. A Masterpiece." The historicizing introductory text by D'Annunzio and his intertitles were printed in beautifully packaged editions (three versions at different prices), partly in color. The domestic and international marketing of the film, which tied in with its production and distribution, was unprecedented in cinema history in terms of both quantity and quality (Caranti 2006).

For a long time, the question of the film's authorship and the extent of D'Annunzio's involvement had been answered with conjecture. It has now been clarified thanks to an interview with the elderly Pastrone by Prolo and

Sadoul, as well as through the publication of various documents. Certainly D'Annunzio described himself as the author of the film several times in 1914, but the reality was different. In 1913 Pastrone had the idea of recruiting the nationally and internationally famous "poet prince" as a face for advertising purposes and sent a contract and the twenty-nine-page script to his Paris address for him to sign page by page. The indebted poet received the significant sum of 50,000 lire. His first contribution was the alteration of the title, first into "La vittima eterna," then into "Cabiria." He also wrote the intertitles, as well as a historical introduction of several pages that was nebulous, mythological and heroic in tone. In advertising and distribution the film appeared as a D'Annunzio work.

It is difficult to give a short summary of the plot, primarily due to the abundance of historical elements and the multiple narrative strands following the fates of individuals. These make the linear narrative extraordinarily complicated, which is why the film makes use of cross-cutting, alternating between parallel plotlines and scenes. The making of *Cabiria* involved a huge number of people and a vast amount of equipment, for example crowd scenes with elephants in alpine snow and caravans of camels in the desert. The film was shot not only in the studios in Turin, but in Tunisia, Sicily and the Piedmontese Alps (the Valli de Lanzo, where Hannibal is said to have crossed into Italy). The action took place in settings separated by vast distances: in Sicily, Carthage, Numidia/North Africa, the Italian peninsula, the Alps and the Mediterranean Sea. The plot is further complicated by the fabulating insertion of historical events into the individual stories of Cabiria, Fulvio Axilla and Maciste, an effect enhanced visually by the fantastic architecture in the film (e.g., the palace at Carthage or the Temple of Moloch, see Figure 2.1).

Many authors have praised the historical precision of the cinematic reconstruction (Pastrone is said to have studied, among other things, models in the Louvre in Paris). It seems to me, however, that although this applies to the perfection of the *mise-en-scène* overall, the grand set pieces such as the statue of Moloch relate to North African history in the same way that Fritz Lang's Moloch machine in *Metropolis* relates to modern industrialization. These sets and the narrative itself reproduce mythical fantasies and classroom clichés (and not, in the first instance, historical events). One result is a loss of the clarity in perspective and scene-closure characteristic of Guazzoni in favor of narrative extravagance in images and texts. At the same time, the image surface is realistic and in contrast to the texts gets by without metaphors or symbols.

The story plays out in the third century BC during the Second Punic War up to the defeat of Carthage by Scipio Africanus. During an eruption of

Figure 2.1 Temple of Moloch in *Cabiria* (1914). Screen capture from DVD © Kino Lorber Home Video, 2000.

Mount Etna over Catania in Sicily, the patrician daughter Cabiria goes missing but is rescued by her nurse, Croessa. The pair are captured on the shore by pirates and taken to North Africa. Meanwhile the Second Punic War has broken out and Hannibal crosses the Alps. The high priest Karthalo has bought Cabiria in the market at Carthage and wants to sacrifice her to the flame-spitting, man-eating "brazen god, Moloch." Croessa manages to send word to the Roman patrician Fulvio Axilla, who is secretly living in Carthage as a kind of spy, and he has the girl rescued by his strongman slave Maciste. Pursued, Maciste entrusts the girl to Princess Sophonisba. Maciste is captured and Axilla leaves for Rome. Years pass. Cabiria becomes Elissa, the slave and confidante of Sophonisba, and the film dwells on the opulence and intrigues of the Palace at Carthage. In the meantime, the Roman navy has attacked the Carthaginian ally Syracuse, but Archimedes uses concave mirrors to set the fleet on fire and destroy it. Allied with the Numidian king Massinissa, Scipio Africanus finally manages to defeat the Carthaginians. Elissa escapes but is threatened once again by Karthalo. She helps free the prisoners Axilla and Maciste, and Maciste in turn can help her against the high priest. The story ends happily with Fulvio Axilla and Cabiria, now his fiancée, sailing together to Rome.

In his notes in the printed program, the lavishness of which varied according to price, D'Annunzio prefaced his intertitles inserted into the film with a historical introduction heroicizing and glorifying Rome in archaic-sounding

language. This overdone style is carried over into the intertitles. These are interspersed with a roughly equal number of regular titlecards with plot information, such as "The innkeeper Bodastoret," "The Temple of Moloch," "Her deception is punished," "On the way to Rome," or as direct speech/dialogue, such as "'Send me Maciste in secret.'" All titles, including the opening and closing credits, as well as the titles of individual episodes, appear in bright capital letters, as if they were engraved on a slab of dark marble fixed to a wall.

The split intertitles in *Cabiria* add further dimension to the dual discourse of image and text in early silent film. Whereas the explanatory titles align with standard cinematic practice, the "poetic" titles seem to assert an independent dimension of meaning as a form of metatext beyond the "second text" (the regular title cards). With its emphatic rhetoric, the metatext echoes the fantastic monumentality of the staging and historical sets without being meaningful in a semantic sense, yet for this reason adding to the film's emotional force. Both single phrases and the bombast of the whole can thus slip into the matrix of the viewers' psychological and ideological dispositions. Another factor that should not be forgotten is cinema's ambition for sociocultural elevation (of itself and its viewers) through high literature.

As a "formalist" opposed to *verismo* and realism, the writer D'Annunzio stood as much for a "sensual decadence and worldliness" as for a "grand language of national rhetoric," overloaded with mythology, symbolism and metaphor, which in other respects he lived up to in his political and military activities. The style and vocabulary of the intertitles created an atmosphere of heightened affect, favoring the national "assimilation" of the film's historical narratives, which were as impressive as they were confused. At the very least this atmosphere promoted fantasies of greatness, might, heroism and destiny transcending individual fates.

It is paradoxical that *Cabiria* would have less need of intertitles than its predecessors, and no longer would have to present itself necessarily as a tableau film. *Cabiria* was the crowning glory of historical films not only in terms of personnel and resources, but also with regard to the technical and aesthetic evolution of film and the richness of cinematic language in camera work and composition, which contributed to its contemporary evaluation as the pinnacle of "cinematic art." Even if the plot had not been so multifaceted or encompassed such expanses of time and space, Pastrone would have succeeded more than his predecessors in communicating narrative development to the viewer by the purely pictorial means of cinematography and composition. His camera work involved relatively frequent pans, and in addition he made the camera mobile by placing it on a dolly of his own invention.[8] The formats of the field size were more flexible and varied than in

earlier historical films. As well as long and medium-long shots, he very often used medium ("American") shots and occasionally even close-ups. Some of the trick shots were done with models, which had never before been used to the same extent. The lighting was also innovative: first, there was the artistic use of strong electric lights both in interior *and* exterior scenes, then there was the use of sunlight reflected by silver umbrellas as well as the sets being covered in reflective material. The combination of these methods produced a strong three-dimensional effect (even in interior shots). At several points, the film cuts back and forth between various locations far apart from each other, a practice which was later systematically developed, for example, by Griffith in *Intolerance* (1916).

In addition to the more spectacular events (e.g., Hannibal sequence, burning ships), three sequences have particular imaginative force: first the "Sinfonia del fuoco," rich in lighting effects and scenography, in the Temple of Moloch in the second episode; then the (romantic) *contre-jour* shot of a camel caravan wending through the desert in the fifth episode (116 seconds); finally the trick shots for Sophonisba's dream in the third episode (50 seconds). While she lies sleeping on a couch with Elissa kneeling on the right, there appears in the dark upper area of the picture a row of three cat's eyes, a hand with clawing fingers, and the three-eyed head of Moloch with Sophonisba in its mouth, all fading in and out, and sometimes cross-fading.

Cabiria bundles together many historical events and myths. It gathers between them various motifs of an internal, highly sentimental plot, following the fate of a kidnapped and enslaved girl over decades to reach a happy ending. Within this, there is also the story of the noble lower-class strongman (Maciste) as rescuer with no social or sexual aspirations—to some degree as an extra-historical myth of strength.[9] These internal storylines are also much more complex than in earlier historical films. Unlike the external story of history in general and the grand scenes, the viewer can relate to them more directly with emotional sympathy.

The relationships between the two plot lines are fascinating. The qualitative distinctiveness of *Cabiria* lies in its ability to satisfy the viewer with an alternating rhythm of curiosity (to see historical events and grandeur) and empathy (through the intimate stories). Amid this tension, the metatextual intertitles (as a kind of guiding link between the two storylines in the sense of abstract interpretation) reveal their function, on one hand to activate the seemingly independent faculty of imagination through "beauty," but on the other to simultaneously restrain imagination by mythologizing history and thus reducing it to its essence: the might of ancient Rome and the Romans (right down to the linguistic overtones of Latin). Thus the film sorts, in almost Manichaean fashion, the Romans into goodies and the

Carthaginians into foreign baddies. This also finds its way into the visual style of the film where an Egyptian-Oriental look had to be invented for the Carthaginian buildings and set items instead of a Greco-Roman one (Dorgeloh 2013: 235).

Here we find the covert functional connection with Italian ideological history: the film appeared between the victory of Italy over Turkey in 1912, with the annexation of Libya (the area in which *Cabiria* is set) and the Dodecanese, and the propaganda for Italy's entry into the First World War. That Scipio Africanus both frees the maiden Cabiria and captures the southern shore of the Mediterranean—*Mare nostrum*—(as he would again twenty-three years later in Carmine Gallone's historical epic *Scipione l'Africano*, in that case in the period between Fascist military interventions in Abyssinia and Spain) had less historical than analogical function in the creation of a diffuse ideology, which in turn became a source for manifest ideology and propaganda.[10] The combination of the external storyline, with its mythical elements and confused fantasies, and the internal one, with its title cards and emotional emphasis, is useful in this regard because it makes the imagination more mobile than the classical severity of, for instance, the Guazzoni films.

These perceptual and emotional substrates of psychic processes are retained for non-Italian viewers without having to be charged with national ideology. The use of the gaze in the conquest of space and history in view of pictures that are as realistic as they are fantastic, combined with fantasies of strength, power and goodness, created a powerful cinematic promise of emotional rewards for viewers. This promise of the epic historical film is practically unrivaled because it professes to replace the infantile dimension of the Ego in favor of an adult one capable of facing reality—in a cinematically linked regressive process.

Pastrone and Griffith

The debate over the significance of Italian historical films to film history, has, in Italy and the United States, mainly concentrated on the Pastrone–Griffith relationship. The long-circulating claim that David Wark Griffith acquired copies of the Italian films, is no more than rumor: he himself said he had never seen *Quo Vadis?* or *Cabiria*. Either way, a more concrete consideration is the significant similarity between the film-makers in the development of cinema in their respective countries, without this necessarily implying direct influence. Until 1914, US film-makers were mostly producing single-reel films with a maximum extent of 1,000 feet (15 minutes); Griffith's first two-reel film dates from 1911 (and was still screened by the distributor in two

parts: *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled*). His first (and the first in the United States) four-reel film (*Judith of Bethulia*, 1914) was released for screening by Biograph only after delays, which is why Griffith split from the company. It showed crowd scenes and had great success. Filming for *The Birth of a Nation* began on July 4, 1914, at a time when Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* and Caserini's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* had already been successfully showing in the United States for some time, as would Pastrone's *Cabiria* soon after. *The Birth of a Nation* had a running time of over two hours, and both this film and *Cabiria* were leading cinema programs around the world in terms of prestige and box office takings. However, more meaningful than these aspects, it seems to me, are their similar choices in themes, genres and means of cinematic expression (cf. Turconi 1963: 37-8; Ames 1974: 99ff; Cincotti 1975; Barry Salt in Fell 1983: 287ff; Carluccio 2006).

Yet the search for film history clues should actually be directed to a more important similarity between Pastrone and Griffith: both directors found forms which gave their historical films a maximum of both cinematic spectacle and childlike, imaginative (but also ideologically exploitable) mythologization of history. This connection is the foundation of *Cabiria* and *Birth of a Nation*'s public appeal. This is true of the Italian historical epics in general and their many new versions which continue to be released, especially in Italy and the United States. The amalgamation of the quantitatively and qualitatively colossal before the eyes with the imagination of individual and collective greatness in the mind is the reason for the popularity of this genre. This is reflected in cinema and television programming, still filled with such films today.

NOTES

1. The length of *Cabiria* was a world record in 1914. 1,000 meters was not exceeded in Italy until 1910/1911, following the usual 250–300 meters and then, in 1909/1910, 600–700 meters.
2. *Il granatiere Roland* (dir. Luigi Maggi), for example, was filmed in 1911 with 2,000 extras; *Quo Vadis?* (dir. Enrico Guazzoni, 1913) with 5,000; and *Cabiria* (1913/14) with 10,000.
3. In 1910, for example, there were seven members of the nobility on Milano Film's board of company directors; there were also barons and counts among the film directors: e.g., Baldassare Negroni, Giulio Antamoro, Giuseppe De Liguoro.
4. Actresses and divas of Italian cinema famous from 1911 onwards: Francesca Bertini, Lyda Borelli, Hesperia, Leda Gys, Lydia Quaranta, Italia Almirante Manzini, Pina Menichelli, Maria Jacobini, Lia Fornia, Maria Carmi, Mary Cléo Tarlarini, Rina De Liguoro, etc. The most famous stage actress,

Eleonora Duse, on the other hand, made only one (realistic) film: *Cenere* 1917 (dir. Febo Mari). Famous stage actors came to film much earlier — Amleto Novelli, Ermete Zacconi, Giovanni Grasso, Gustavo Serena, Ruggero Ruggeri, as well as Emilio Ghione, Mario Bonnard, Alberto Collo, Febo Mari, Ermete Novelli and Dillo Lombardi, some of whom went over to directing.

5. From 1909, the main comedians of Italian silent film are, bizarrely, Frenchmen, whose short film series concluded the film programs in the "*comica finale*" (long comedy films were still unusual). André Deed, who, together with Max Linder, was one of the most famous Pathé comedians in French film, appeared in Italy as the serial character Cretinetti (exported to France as Gribouille), Marcel Fabre, previously a clown, became Robinet, Ferdinand Guillaume consecutively played Tontolini (Cines), Coccineli (Milano) and Polidor (Pasquali) under contract to different companies, and Emile Verdannes became Totò. The most famous Italian comedian was the Piedmontese dialect actor Ernesto Vaser as Fricot (in film from 1906). Other Italian comedians thought up French-sounding characters for themselves, e.g., Armando Gelsomini as Jolicoeur and Giuseppe Gambardella as Kri-Kri.
6. Ursus was the first strongman of Italian and also world cinema. He was followed by Spartacus, Maciste, Herkules, Saetta, Samson, Goliath, etc. The Circus Maximus scenes were outdone again in Enrico Vidali's *Spartaco* (Pasquali, 1913) (Latium had already filmed the first *Spartaco* in 1909). This is the beginning of a tradition most cultivated in Italy and the United States of Circus Maximus scenes in epic films. Once again it was Guazzoni who achieved the most spectacular filmic depiction of chariot racing in his 1924 film *Messalina*. Fred Niblo's *Ben-Hur* (De Mille, Hollywood, 1925), at that time the most expensive film ever made, seems like plagiarism (and most of Niblo's film was shot in Italy).
7. For example, before the screening in Rome, the Triestine pilot Giovanni Vidner dropped fliers on the city. Cf. Prolo 1951: 111 and Quargnolo 1963.
8. Salt (in Fell 1983: 297) stresses the "Cabiria movement" ("tracking shots" in practically static scenes), which were then imitated in Scandinavia and the United States.
9. Pastrone had found Bartolomeo Pagano, who played the character Maciste (borrowing from Ursus in *Quo Vadis?*), working as a stevedore at the port of Genoa. The popularity of the Maciste character grew over the course of a large number of further films, e.g., *Maciste* (1915), *Maciste alpino* (1916) —both by Pastrone —as well as *Maciste poliziotto* (1918), *Maciste medium* (1918), *Maciste atleta* (1918), *Maciste innamorato* (1919), *Maciste l'imperatore* (1924) and so on. See Reich 2015.
10. Alovisio (2014: 46ff) considers the involvement of nationalist ideology in historical films and especially in *Cabiria* to be negligible; but he makes the mistake of only looking at the obvious content of these films. When one includes the cultural and ideological context of their contemporary reception in Italy and the role of D'Annunzio, one comes to a very different conclusion (cf. Schenk 2008).

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CHAPTER THREE

From 1916 to the Arrival of Sound: The Systematization, Expressivity and Self-reflection of the Feature Film

Maria Wyke

War had profound effects on cinema's engagement with ancient Greece and Rome. By the time of the First World War, film production was a global industry, the motion picture an influential medium of communication about political, social and aesthetic values, and visits to the film theater an institutionalized cultural practice (Koszarski 1990). Yet the war damaged film production in France and Italy, isolated the German market and reduced the flow into the United States of applauded European features set in classical antiquity, such as *Quo Vadis?* (1913) and *Cabiria* (1914). By 1916, the new Hollywood aesthetic was becoming far more attractive to spectators at home and abroad, and the Hollywood star and studio systems the object of the European film industries' envy (Thompson 2004a: 256). Hostility between countries, patriotic feeling and the protectionist strategies of governments all contributed to the post-war perception of film as a vital part of national economies and national cultural identities (Grieveson and Krämer 2004: 333). From 1916 to the late 1920s, in the heyday of the silent feature film, the ancient worlds projected on screen grew to monumental, spectacular proportions. Ancient characters drew closer to the camera and, therefore, to their modern audience (intensifying their facial expressivity, revealing their

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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emotional interiority and mouthing dialogue displayed in modern languages). Ancient events quickened their pace better to match the speed of modernity. And film-makers and critics reflected upon ancient Greece and Rome as vehicles for cinematic creativity and for the understanding of cinema as a uniquely silent, universal pantomimic art.

This chapter investigates seven films of the period as exemplars of those developments. Catalogues are good starting points to establish which antiquity films were made in the era of the silent feature. For example, Dumont (2009) provides probably the most comprehensive inventory by period reconstructed on screen, Aubert (2009) lists Italian antiquity films by year of release, and Michelakis and Wyke (2013) provide a substantial filmography of the silent films discussed in that volume. Some films are available commercially on DVD; however, most can only be accessed in archives. Usai (2000) gives details of the most important archives internationally and discusses their databases. He also stresses that while a restoration is usually singular, the "original" version of a silent film is multiple—often surviving as different prints designed for distinct international audiences. To understand the on-screen worlds of antiquity we need, therefore, to analyze their variants, but also their extra-cinematic documentation (which grew exponentially in this period from internal studio communications to fan magazines). Such research is vital where a silent film survives in damaged condition, and indispensable where it does not survive at all.

Repetition: *Quo Vadis?* (UCI, Italy, 1924, dir. Gabriellino D'Annunzio and Georg Jacoby)

Historical films regularly reiterate events, figures and images (Hughes-Warrington 2007: 23). Classical antiquity is especially repeatable because of its value as a "resource of the recognizable" (Foster 2016: 213). The history, culture, languages and thought of ancient Greece and Rome have been rendered familiar through schooling and through their dense mediation across the millennia in literary and figurative works. In the 1920s, however, the Italian film *Quo Vadis?* repeated not only the Church legend concerning the miraculous visitation of Christ to Saint Peter outside Rome along the Via Appia, and its narration in the nineteenth-century Polish novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz which bears that title, but also its reconstruction in the previous film version of *Quo Vadis?*, first distributed to international acclaim some eleven years earlier. Film had now been laced into the network of receptions of Roman history and the opportunity to recognize that history's repetitions was being made available to a broad audience, from the highly educated to the illiterate.

After its initial collapse during the First World War, Italian film production partially recovered only to spin into a steep decline as a result of the rampant disorganization and fragmentation of the industry (Reich 2013). From war's end until the later 1920s, Italian film-makers attempted to re-conquer foreign markets by reviving the characteristics of its earlier, triumphant antiquity features: familiar literary narratives of Roman history, grandiose reconstructions of classical architecture, the fluent choreography of crowds, elaborately antiquarian décor and costumes, artistic composition and the use of natural light and authentic landscapes (Aubert 2009: 29–39; Muscio 2013). Adhering to now outmoded narrative and visual conventions, such remakes include *Fabiola* (1918), *Messalina* (1922), *Quo Vadis?* (1924) and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (*Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei*, 1926). The post-war *Quo Vadis?* was shot in Rome under the auspices of the Unione cinematografica italiana (a brief attempt at centralization through the aggregation of eleven production companies) and with the additional support of German co-production and co-direction. It cites the preceding Italian feature through its reuse of the same source for its title, characters and plotline, its replication of earlier cinematic settings and its redeployment of the actor Bruto Castellani (cast once again as the strongman Ursus).[1] Yet it also manifests some significant, if limited, innovations.

The remake maps out a sophisticated spatial symbolism for ancient Rome along a vertical axis (Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 42–45), aided by extreme long and high-angle shots. On the surface of the ancient city and at its center sits the emperor Nero's resplendent palace (Figure 3.1a), while the Christians gather in the catacombs beneath. Nero holds court in bright sunlight, while the Christians pray in the gloom. The narrative drive of the film is towards Nero's ignominious flight out of the city, running through his deserted palace, clambering down a cellar hatch, while the Christians emerge victorious to occupy the city's public and domestic spaces. *Quo Vadis?* (1924) also shifts its focus away from the fictive love story of the soldier Vinicius and the Christian girl Lygia onto the sadistic emperor (Figure 3.1b), who is the first character to be introduced. Following the traits of Weimar cinema with which its German co-director Georg Jacoby and its German star Emil Jannings were associated, the co-production reveals an obsession with the specular (Elsaesser 2000). Viewers are repeatedly invited to share Nero's imperial gaze encapsulated by the ring through which he regularly peers. An early sequence of underwater shots in extreme close-up flaunts a woman seemingly being devoured by moray eels for the emperor's pleasure, thus suggesting that this post-war remake will draw on its more advanced technologies to offer fresh perspectives on the pain and death in which the emperor takes such visual delight. Lygia is warned about Nero's predatory

(a)

(b)

Figure 3.1 (a) The Emperor Nero's resplendent palace. *Quo Vadis?* (1924); (b) Emil Jannings as the Emperor Nero. *Quo Vadis?* (1924).

gaze before he attempts to rape her at his palace, yet later, when he makes a second attempt to rape her at a hideaway (not attested in the novel or the earlier film but invoking the Gospel narrative concerning the Devil's temptation of Christ, Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 60–61 and 174–175), the camera interchanges victim's and assailant's point of view—revulsion *and* lust, both in close-up. Spectators are also asked to appreciate the intensity of the emperor's desire for Lygia when, through the expressive use of superimposition, he experiences an hallucination of her face so intense that even he has to cover his eyes. Nero is the only figure to have their emotional interiority thus revealed on screen (Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 34–35).

Historical films speak to their audiences in the present and future tenses, as well as the past (Hughes-Warrington 2007: 76). Specific histories of ancient Rome projected on screen generate specific resonances with the time and place in which there are produced and consumed, and do so most often using the instruments of heritage or analogy (Wyke 1997). Yet, such films are complex entities and thus the connections they evoke between antiquity and modernity are often intriguingly ambiguous. The premiere of the post-war *Quo Vadis?* took place in the Italian capital in March 1925, two months after the declaration by Mussolini of a fascist dictatorship. In the film, an inscription in Latin clearly runs across the entablature of Nero's palace as an ornament: *alme sol, curru nitido diem qui/promis et celas aliusque et idem/nasceris, possis nihil urbe Roma/visere maius* ("nourishing sun, who in your shining chariot reveals and hides and rises both different and the same, may you never look upon a city greater than Rome," Horace *Carmen saeculare* 9–12; see Figure 3.1). Part of this poetic quotation had already been utilized by Gabriele D'Annunzio (the nationalist poet and father of the film's Italian co-director) in an ode to Rome as head of a new Italy, and later it would be inscribed on a triumphal arch in Libya and printed on Italian stamps commemorating the fascist acquisition of African empire. The spectacular, 3D sets for this historical film were built in Rome's Villa Borghese based on designs provided by the architect Armando Brasini, whose taste for neo-classical monumentality was simultaneously being put to direct use by the regime. They thus appear to construct in Rome's imperial past a physical manifestation of fascism's imperial future (Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 62–63 and 147–148 find other fascist notes in the film). Architecture, however, is undermined by archaeology.

From Italy's foundation, state and Church were in constant dispute over the nation's *romanità*—the nature of its continuity with ancient Rome. The Vatican established a pontifical institute dedicated to the revelation of the city's catacombs and its early Christian martyrdoms in the same year as the *Quo Vadis?* remake exhibited Saint Peter below ground, sanctifying

a Christian plan to bring ruin to the corrupt empire above. The remake continues the earlier film's analogical play between Nero and the modern Italian state in order to represent in apocalyptic terms the struggle of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century to wrest authority from secular government (Wyke 1997: 124–130). Repeating the thematic of the *Quo Vadis?* tradition, Rome's magnificence is again stained by the corruption of its sadistic emperor. Nero's guests enter his splendid palace under the hymnal inscription in order to participate in an imperial rule of "gluttony" and "license." The people rise up against him through their acquired admiration of Christian virility and virtue. Yet repetition also exposes variation. Unlike its predecessor, the remake does not screen the martyrdom of Saint Peter (as Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 205–206 observe). It concludes instead with his blessing upon the marital union of the fictional characters Lygia and Vinicius (now a convert). Persecution is at an end, and Christians can look forward to a happy life in the light. In the 1920s the Catholic analogy thus concludes in a more positive key than in the 1910s, perhaps looking forward to the kind of public reconciliation between Church and fascist state that was eventually sealed in 1929 through a series of accords.

Quo Vadis? (1924) cannot have been comfortable viewing for members of the fascist regime nor even for members of the Catholic clergy (given its frequent alignment with Nero's perverse gaze). It also failed, in the main, to satisfy aesthetic tastes at home and abroad. The Milan daily *L'Ambrosiano* (February 28, 1925) stated that "in order to signal the resumption of grand Italian releases it's not enough to revamp an old thing, to exploit the popularity of a genre, to be tugged along by foreign innovators and possibly ask them for material help," while the *New York Times* (February 16, 1925) reported that the remake's story unfolded too slowly, its scene changes were too numerous and its acting too old fashioned. Unlike other film industries in this period, the Italian film industry failed to refresh its pictorial, literary and theatrical repertory for the creation of classical worlds on-screen (Marlow-Mann 2000; Muscio 2013: 164–165) or to utilize new developments that would enable cinema's ancient worlds to continue to appeal to modern audiences.

The Hollywood Star System: *Cleopatra* (Fox, USA, 1917, dir. J. Gordon Edwards)

American directors had been stimulated by the spectacular illusion of a living antiquity displayed in Italian films like the earlier *Quo Vadis?* (1913) to develop a new aesthetic for their own historical films. In works such as D. W. Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* (1914), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)

and *Intolerance* (1916), and Cecil B. DeMille's *Joan the Woman* (1917), all the resources of cinema were placed at the service of narrative clarity, expressivity and momentum. *Mise-en-scène*, lighting, acting, camera movement, framing and editing together put intimate focus on the individual struggling against the grand backdrop of fate. Placing the past and present in parallel montage supported analogical explicitness, moral ambition and a conception of history as "eternal recurrence" (Hansen 1991: 168). By 1923, Ricciotto Canudo, an early theorist of cinema, was dismissing the nineteenth-century aesthetic of "chromocinegraphic frescoes" so beloved of the historical genre in Europe and arguing that its only hope lay in following the Americans (Véray 2005: 337–339). The new aesthetic was advanced by a new mode of industrial production based in Hollywood. The large-scale manufacture of highly capitalized feature films was concentrated cost-effectively in a few corporations or studios, where their heads ensured that a profit-making schedule of films was pre-planned, writers employed to produce detailed shooting scripts, staff trained in specialisms such as set or costume design and sets recycled. Such production practices were integrated vertically with controlled distribution and block-booked exhibition in studio-owned movie palaces and theatre chains (Gomery 2005: 7–70). As standardized commercial products, features were now carefully differentiated, heavily advertised and targeted at diverse audiences in the domestic and foreign markets over which Hollywood took increasing control (Koszarski 1990: 63–94). Late in 1917, the Fox Film Corporation widely advertised the appearance of Theda Bara as the lead in *Cleopatra*. It is difficult to judge whether this eleven-reel "stupendous superpicture" had yet fully adopted Hollywood's new aesthetic, as only the tiniest snippet is currently known to survive. Yet the lost film's scenario, wealth of stills, studio promotion, press books, press reviews and discussion in fan magazines indicate that it was certainly a successful product of the new studio system and that system's exploitation of film stars.[2]

Stars performed a vital commercial function for studios, which tied them into lengthy contracts and manipulated them in order to market products, seek box-office success and establish brand loyalty in audiences. Through the channels of the mass media, publicists worked to familiarize spectators with a set of characteristics and connotations devised for each star the studio employed—a distinctive off-screen image, variations on which would then be performed across the films in which the star appeared (Koszarski 1990: 25–34 and 259–262). Theda Bara was the first American star to have an off-screen persona fabricated for her in this way (Koszarski 1990: 273–276). In 1915, she starred in Fox's modern fable *A Fool There Was* as a woman known only as "the Vampire." The protagonist's genealogy can be traced back through an American stage play, via a Kipling poem and a

Burne-Jones painting, to the monstrous blood-suckers of Bram Stoker's late nineteenth-century novel *Dracula* (Studlar 2011: 118–123 and Shamoon 2012: 1072–1076). She ruthlessly pursues and seduces "the Husband," tears him from his family, drains him of his fortune and abandons him to death when she moves on to her next victim. The film was such a hit that Fox agents subsequently promoted an extra-cinematic image for its star, through feeds into newspapers and fan magazines, portraying her as a modern vamp or home wrecker, and they routinely troped her backstory, current home life and habits in terms of nineteenth-century orientalist fantasies of ancient Egypt (Lant 1992: 90–91). Although born Theodosia Goodman to a Jewish tailor and housewife in Cincinnati, Fox claimed that the star had been delivered at an Egyptian oasis in the shadow of the Sphinx and sucked snake venom as an infant. Her home in Los Angeles was furnished in "early vampire" ottomans, rugs and beaded curtains. Her hobbies included the preparation of perfumes and the practice of black magic. Her professional name spelt out "Arab Death." She knew herself to be a reincarnation of Cleopatra (Wyke 2002: 268–270). Thus Fox publicity about, and press reviews of, *Cleopatra* treated the film as both logical continuation and historical guarantor of a star image already fully established for Theda Bara. After its opening at the Lyric Theatre, the *New York Times* (October 15, 1917) reported: "Cleopatra of Egypt was among the earliest of the vampires of history, if not the earliest, and it was therefore but a matter of time until the siren Theda Bara should duly attend to the transfer of that temptress to the movie screen." The captivating and murderous Cleopatra of nineteenth-century orientalism shapes Bara's star image and that image then shapes the representation of the Queen of Egypt on screen. The lost feature film appears to have opened with long shots of the "desert wastes" of Ventura County. The camera races toward studio-constructed pyramids and a Sphinx on whose features are then imposed those of Theda Bara playing "the Siren of the Nile." The sexually and racially transgressive modern vamp is thus monumentalized and authenticated as she finds her origins in the supposed realities of ancient Egypt and the truth of ancient history (Wyke 2002: 272–273).

Throughout the surviving scenario written by Adrian Johnson considerable emphasis is placed on the "oriental" qualities of *Cleopatra*'s sets, its scenes of love and murder and its throngs of extras. The scenario also makes constant reference to a French drama by Victorien Sardou and a British novel by Rider Haggard as its main sources, because such nineteenth-century works conveniently provided for the Queen a ready-made grand narrative of oriental seduction, conquest and death. Three examples of "loves that wrecked empires" thus unfold through the course of the film: Julius Caesar

Figure 3.2 A bejewelled Theda Bara poised to dance as "the Egyptian vampire." *Cleopatra* (1917).

is seduced by Cleopatra's charms into a monarchic ambition that costs him his life on return to Rome; similarly enthralled, the Egyptian Pharon forgets his mission to liberate his people from the Greek usurper and, instead, gives up to her the treasures of his Pharaonic ancestors; Mark Antony sacrifices his wife, country and life for his enchanting mistress yet, at the film's close, it is Cleopatra who has lost her own kingdom for true love. The scene in which the Queen is revealed to Caesar from a rug cites the celebrated painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Cléopâtre et César* (1866), only to emphasize its difference (Figure 3.2). This is not the Orient embodied as a woman awaiting penetration by a masterful Western general, but a woman Orientalized as mysteriously alluring, by whom the general will be vanquished. At the moment when Cleopatra is brought in (according to the scenario), the mighty Caesar is exacting tributes from a fallen people in the council chamber of the Egyptian palace. Those tributes are left discarded at his feet, however, when Caesar's eyes are drawn in awe to the spectacle of a bejeweled Theda Bara poised to dance as "the Egyptian vampire."

Heritage and analogy are not the only pathways to the present for historical films (and *Cleopatra* does not seem to offer parallels in antiquity for the current war in Europe, into which the United States had been drawn in April 1917). Present time can also be inscribed on the body, gestures and costumes of film actors, in their casting and in the star image they bring to their part (Hughes-Warrington 2007: 68). This is because star images are not just marketing devices but also discursive sites for the exploration of social values. The "vamp" that Theda Bara persistently played on screen and off until around 1919 became popular at a time of increased immigration and growing female emancipation, both social and economic (Bellow 2009). Constructed as sexually menacing, racially hybrid and ultimately deadly, the star image of the vamp has been understood as a mechanism to explore contemporary fears that capitulation to the demands of modern women threatens the vitality of American men and damages a nation idealized as an Anglo-Saxon republic of domesticated wives and upright husbands (Shamoon 2012). Theda Bara's performance as "the Egyptian vampire" in *Cleopatra* (1917) thus constitutes a brazenly hyperbolic elaboration of American anxieties about gender, sexuality and race (Wyke 2002: 272–273).

Yet in the United States at this time, it was mainly women who saw films and mainly women who read about and responded to discussion of their stars in fan magazines; consequently the Hollywood star system was largely targeted at women (Koszarski 1990: 25–34). Fan magazines and their talk of stars thus repay scrutiny because they provide a rare opportunity to trace the role of antiquity in female spectatorship and the extra-cinematic construction of female subjectivity. In *Picture Play Magazine* (February 15, 1916) an article was published under the title "My strange life" seemingly written by Theda Bara (and therefore fabricated or authorized by Fox publicists). She describes with amusement the letters she has received from spectators who have taken literally her performance of vampire parts on screen—angry women and adoring men who have experienced that "Cleopatra feeling." One man writes all the way from Australia: "Come to my arms, oh, Cleopatra; my heart is burning for you!" For the readers of *Picture Play*, however, Theda Bara distinguishes carefully between "reel" and "real" life. She presents herself here as conscious of her self-construction and undermines it, drawing her readers into a community of women utterly aware of the maneuvers of the star system and in pleasing complicity with the star herself (Wyke 2002: 277; Bronfen 2013). Fan magazines regularly adopted this tone of ironic detachment, inviting an understanding of stardom as a kind of playful performance or masquerade (Studlar 1996). Integrated into a star system so conceived, Cleopatra offers to women of the late 1910s the momentary pleasure of a different identity without concern for narrative punishment.

The Orient in which she moves opens up a temporary escape from everyday constraints into an exotic space of female sensuality and power (Studlar 2011: 121). Yet, in *Cleopatra* (1917), racial transgression is comfortably delimited (the Queen is Othered as Greek rather than Egyptian) and transgressions of sexuality and gender culminate in a deeply impassioned, yet more conventional, true love. Although the film was a great commercial success at the time of its release, the star image on which it was based soon became outdated.

The Hollywood Studio System: *Ben-Hur* (MGM, USA, 1925, dir. Fred Niblo)

Artificial conflations of on-screen characters with off-screen personalities were much less frequently invented by Hollywood studios for their stars after the First World War and into the 1920s. Studio publicity agents and journalists on fan magazines encouraged female spectators and readers to claim a less ironic, more intimate and emotional stake in stars. And they sought to satisfy the now more fully established sexual emancipation of women (which had been greatly advanced by more reliable birth control) through making male stars available for female visual pleasure. Yet, both studios and fan magazines struggled to contain such deviant—because woman-oriented—models of masculinity within the conventional bounds of heterosexual romance (Studlar 1996 and 2004). Before Ramon Novarro was cast to play the protagonist in *Ben-Hur* (1925) and was still a junior player at Metro Pictures, he was bizarrely promoted as "The Greek God from Mexico" in an article for *Picture Play Magazine* that emphasized his embodiment of youth, intelligence and art (volume 18.6, August 1923, pp. 56–57 and 99–100). The rhetoric of classicism appears to have been employed routinely thereafter as one of many strategies to render Novarro's race, religion and sexuality more palatable to orthodox American tastes at a time of heightened chauvinism. His subsequent casting in *Ben-Hur*, when contracted to the newly merged studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), provided further inventive opportunities (Williams 2013: 113–141).

Born in Mexico, Novarro gained an old world aura through his presence in an historical film set during the Roman occupation of Judaea. His ethnicity could even be contrived seemingly to authorize his performance within a reconstructed ancient world, as the star's Mexican birth was translated into a story of Aztec origins. Novarro's devout Catholicism also did not jar with a film into which was woven the tale of Christ. His religion might appear positively to invite Papal sanction for the MGM spectacular, as when *Photoplay*

for November 1924 (volume 26.6, p. 55), in a section on "studio news and gossip," displayed the star posed in a photograph before the entrance to Saint Peter's above a caption indicating that he had just emerged from a Papal blessing prior to commencing his role in the film. The earlier representation of Novarro as an Apollonian embodiment of youth and art casts the subsequent display of his physique in *Ben-Hur* as a cultured invitation to aesthetic appreciation of the sculpted male form. The presence of the MGM star in an antiquity film then sanctions the continued use of such classicizing tropes, even though some reporters were deploying them covertly as intimations for the discerning reader of Novarro's closeted homosexuality (Chávez 2011). This transformation of Ramon Novarro's image into one better suited to chauvinist times can be found embedded into the narrative drive of *Ben-Hur* (Williams 2013: 135–137). The cruel experience of laboring as a galley slave turns the youthful hero into a man. He will become an idol of Rome and then an athletic, victorious charioteer—a normative star of the arena. The service *Ben-Hur* performed for Novarro's star image is noted explicitly in *Picture Play Magazine* for November 1926: "What Novarro did for 'Ben-Hur', 'Ben-Hur' did for Novarro" (volume 25.3, p. 100). Thus ancient Greece and Rome both had parts to play in the formation of on-screen masculinity.

Hollywood's studio mode of production left a profound impression on the silent feature *Ben-Hur* (1925).[3] In the highly competitive industry that Hollywood had now become, studio producers bought up the rights to prestigious literary or theatrical works with a view to creating on screen a winning, quality adaptation. Conveniently, the historical novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) by General Lew Wallace was both uniquely earnest and uniquely popular (Miller 2008: 154–161). It translated the Gospel story into a thrilling account of one man's suffering, revenge, conversion and restoration to wealth and family. Jesus appears as a character (not just as the apparition of *Quo Vadis?*) and preaches a Christianity of wide appeal because non-sectarian in its features. In the United States of the early twentieth century, only the Bible was outselling Wallace's book. And, by 1920, ten million people was regularly being touted as the number who had seen the extravagant stage version that had just completed years of touring the English-speaking world (Miller 2016: 91). *Ben-Hur* also laid down a unique challenge to the capacity of cinema to transpose to screen from novel or play, because the author's son was known to have resisted the sale of the motion picture rights for some considerable time on the grounds that film was too inferior a medium in which to do justice to his father's work (Solomon 2016: 561–566). By the time the film version was finally released in 1925, the MGM company had drawn on the huge resources of equipment and personnel at its disposal

and spent an exceptional $4 million on its product in order to establish a reputation for itself as a new studio of outstanding artistic, cultural and commercial integrity (Scodel 2013: 218).

The film we now see is the end result of a series of severe production problems with which the studio was confronted. These problems can be investigated in relatively minute detail (from Brownlow in 1968 to Solomon in 2016) because already at the time of its release MGM's *Ben-Hur* was acclaimed as the costliest, most spectacular and stirring motion picture produced to date, a significant work in the history of cinema whose production records should therefore be preserved. Alongside interviews, letters and biographical anecdotes, press reports and reviews, these studio documents catalogue: the imposition of a contractual burden to share with a producer of the stage version any dividends from the box office; labor disputes and political conflicts among crew in fascist Italy where the production was first located; fundamental changes of personnel, including scenarist, director and lead actor; the complex merger of Goldwyn with Metro and Mayer; concerns over reports that Italian extras had drowned at sea; a stunt man's death while taking a sharp curve; the transfer of production back to Culver City; and the necessity of rebuilding sets there, including the extraordinary Antioch circus.

The repetition in the film of motifs from the Ben-Hur tradition exposes cinema's variations, in particular the accommodations made to the values of the multiple film-makers involved and the vast array of spectators that were hoped for. The Nativity at the beginning, the Passion at the end and the citations of the Gospels in between give shape to the sacred tale. Viewers are directed to appreciate the religiosity of such scenes through a return to early cinema's static, tableaux-vivant framing and through the use of bi-chrome Technicolor. Yet MGM's *Ben-Hur* makes no reference to the originary ritual of the Eucharist in its representation of the Last Supper, nor to Christian belief in sin, repentance or redemption (Miller 2008: 163–165). Nor, most significantly, does it include the Resurrection. At the close, it is the re-formed family of Ben-Hur, which had been torn apart at the start, that receives the blessing of Technicolor (Walsh 2016: 132). The film's Christianity is undogmatic in order to become all embracing, and is not placed overtly above Judaism as a superior faith. On the one hand, the hero's commitment to (and retreat from) Judaism is rendered discretely at a time when Jewish immigrants were becoming more visible—and more vulnerable—in the United States. On the other hand, after recent mass migrations of Jews to Palestine, the Jews within the film are not shown in potentially Zionist terms as having an exclusive entitlement to the territories of Judaea (Scodel 2013). The non-doctrinal direction of *Ben-Hur* towards an appreciation of non-violence, forgiveness and prayer achieved through the sacrifice of Christ is

guided by a differentiation between acting styles: antiquated and theatrical for the villainous Messala and the vampiric Iras; a less histrionic, more youthful repertory of gestures for the athletic Ben-Hur and the virtuous Esther (Williams 2013: 116–117). While, in its handling of religion and romance, the film nuances its sources, in its handling of action (especially the hyper-realistic chariot race), the film's astonishing innovation shines through.

A long row of helmeted horse riders blow their trumpets outside the Antioch circus and inside a group of soldiers wave large flags to signal the start of the sequence proper. A tracking shot slowly follows the horsemen through a narrow, dark passageway framed by enormous columns. The camera emerges into the sunlit circus where it stops to tilt upwards, revealing the colossal breadth, depth and height of the set (enhanced by hanging miniatures), before a high-angle shot displays some of the thousands of gesturing extras diversely costumed as internal spectators of the imminent contest. Forty-two concealed cameras capture from alongside, beneath and above the violent and frenetically paced charge of twelve four-horsed chariots round and round the track. Drama is heightened by the second-unit director's insertion of multiple cut-ins to pounding hoofs and spinning wheels, flying manes and flaring nostrils, thrashing whips and glistening muscles, and faces distorted by hatred, viciousness, fear or excitement (Brownlow 1968: 403–409; Solomon 2016: 583–586 and 593–594). The sequence eventually closes with an iris shot of the jubilant victor receiving the accolades of the crowd. Spectacle such as this can rupture the temporality of an historical film, as can casting and star image, for it draws attention to itself as manufactured for the visual pleasure of both the internal and the external spectator (Hughes-Warrington 2007: 68). On a meta-cinematic level, the chariot race in MGM's *Ben-Hur* completes a number of triumphs: of film over novel and stage play (the latter had placed before its audiences fewer chariots on a treadmill before a scrolling panorama, Miller 2008: 162); of Hollywood over European cinema (preemptive chariot races of smaller ambition can be found in the *Messalina* of 1922 and the *Quo Vadis?* of 1924); and of MGM over its competitor studios. Three months after its product opened in New York, *Photoplay* reported that: "For the first time in picture history, the blasé Broadway audience forgot itself so far as to cheer madly during the chariot race. This was indeed a tribute to the picture's sponsors" (March 1926, volume 29.4, p. 49). The film was also unique in its day for the reach of its worldwide distribution and for its protracted "roadshow" exhibition, showing in the United States first in legitimate theaters or opulent picture palaces for an exclusive and limited run at higher than average ticket prices, going on tour in the 1926–27 season to selected cities, and moving to regular distribution across the country only the season thereafter (Solomon 2016: 637–643). MGM took from the Ben-Hur

tradition its association with quality, achievement and appreciation and made of it a sensational success for cinema.

National Cinema: *Helen of Troy* (*Helena*, Bavaria Film, Germany, 1924, dir. Manfred Noa)

The First World War isolated Germany from international film distribution, thus stimulating the expansion of domestic production and the recognition of cinema as a medium of national importance in its ability to propagandize, unify and entertain. After the war, in order to sustain its film industry, the German government imposed quotas on American imports. Production companies sought to counter the seemingly insidious influence of Hollywood and its American values through the development of a culturally and aesthetically distinct national cinema (Garncarz 2004: 389–390). Of the films made between 1919 and 1933, during the Weimar Republic, most attention has been paid to those considered the work of avant-gardist auteurs seeking to maximize the creative potential of the motion picture medium. Yet commercial fiction films were also produced with an eye to both the European as well as the domestic market. Such films often sought out subject matter (including classical themes) that might avoid any adverse, anti-German reaction (Rogowski 2010: 1–12). One feature recreating Roman history and another adapting Greek myth were released in 1924. *Die Hermannschlacht* appears to have been a relatively amateurish recreation of a devastating defeat for the Roman army on Germanic soil at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest that achieved only a limited regional release (Winkler 2013). *Helen of Troy*, however, was an ambitious epic by virtue of its literary source in Homer's *Iliad* and by virtue of its production design: two parts, each as long as a normal feature, detailing the events leading up to Helen's abduction and the consequent destruction of Troy; monumental and carefully differentiated sets often displayed through the use of extreme long shots and high camera angles; a lion hunt as well as a chariot race; battles on sea and land; siege engines and a gigantic wooden horse; the mass choreography of crowds; reputed actors from the German stage; Italian, Russian and Czech film stars; location shooting around Munich; special effects and the emotive use of color (including blue for night-time treachery, red for fire and devastation).[4]

Ancient Greece opens up to cinema worlds other than those provided by ancient Rome. Mythic more often than historical, spectral as well as realistic, ancient Greece on film can appear as an uncanny past (Michelakis and Wyke 2013: 11–13). The disturbing world of *Helen of Troy* is one constituted by visions and dreams, oracles, prayers and curses, priests and witches, icons and

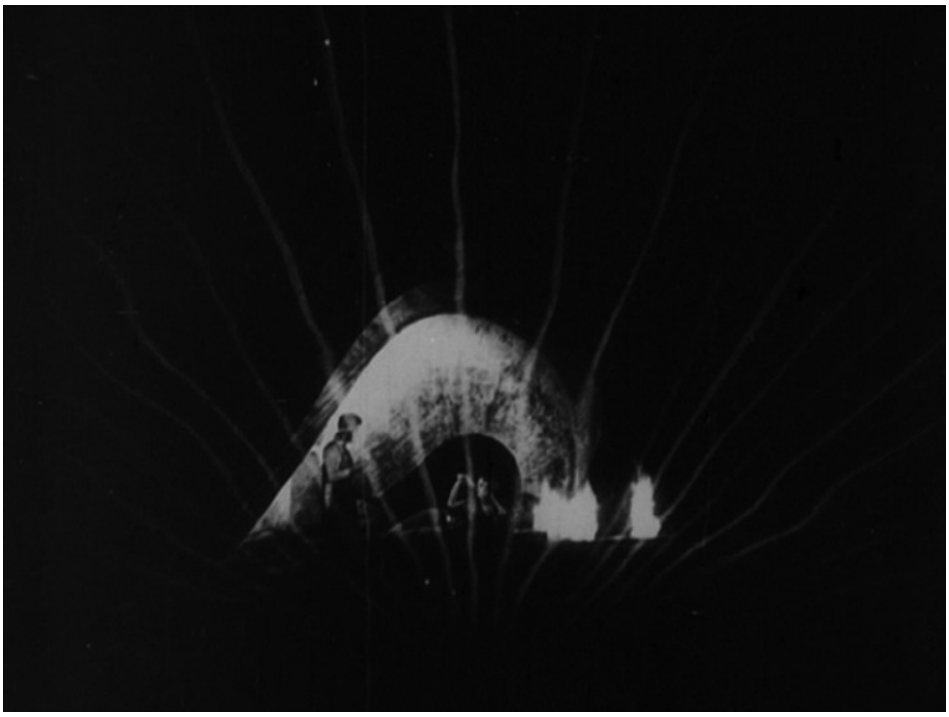

Figure 3.3 The disturbing world of Helen of Troy is one constituted by visions and dreams … *Helen of Troy* (*Helena. Der Untergang Trojas*; 1924).

temples, pious sacrifices and ritual processions (Figure 3.3), and the oversight of deceitful gods who toy tragically with all humanity (Dumont 2009: 181). The signature distorting visual style of Weimar expressionism is evident in hallucinatory sequences that overlay divine on human motivation. As Paris sleeps on the hills overlooking Troy, we see through the technique of superimposition his spirit rise out of his body and marvel at a heavenly apparition of the messenger-god Hermes encircled by radiant light. This phantom Paris, now himself irradiated, hesitates to offer the golden apple which has appeared magically in his hand to the goddess Hera (a colossal figure towering majestically over his tiny form) or to the goddess Athena (envisioned armored and celestial, directing men at war), but walks willingly through a surreally rippling seascape to hand it over to the goddess Aphrodite (stretched out wondrously in a gigantic conch). Paris is doubly driven by mortal love of the beautiful and immortal caprice.

Epic film is often evaluated as "a distilled expression of ideals, anxieties, and conflicts in national self-definition" (Burgoyne 2008: 75). An epic film made during the Weimar Republic particularly invites such a reading, as

Weimar cinema in general has been understood as a cultural production for the nation that manifests national fantasies or fears. *Die Hermannschlacht*, through a celebratory return to Roman history, might appear to will an heroic liberation of modern Germany from foreign occupation and be symptomatic of a yearning for renewed militarism and submission to strong leadership (see Winkler 2013, following Siegfried Kracauer). In contrast, *Helen of Troy*, through its adaptation of Homeric epic in a tragic key, might appear symptomatic of shell shock (see Michelakis and Wyke 2013: 151–152, following Anton Kaes). Especially in its second part, it represents war as defeat and loss: heroism is flawed, the Trojans are "war weary" (*Kriegsmüden*), bodies litter the battlefield, mothers weep for their dead sons. Yet films are "fractured entities" that do not carry single messages (see Kaes 2009: 5). When considered in terms of its architectural construction, for example, *Helen of Troy* has been read as an anti-modernist film that lays waste to urbanism in the material form of the ornate, turreted masonry of the city of Troy (Ventura 2015: 67).

Edification and Titillation: *Ways to Strength and Beauty* (*Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit: Ein Film über modern Körperkultur*, UFA, Germany, 1925, dir. Wilhelm Prager)

Ancient Greece is presented explicitly as the solution to modernity's ills in the German documentary film *Ways to Strength and Beauty* (1925).[5] Divided into five parts that display beneficial ways to cultivate your body (gymnastics; eurhythmics; dance; sport; fresh air, sun and water), the documentary additionally opens with a section on "ancient Greece and modern times." The first intertitle quotes Goethe to the effect that we seem for the first time to understand ourselves when we look back to antiquity. In what follows viewers learn that, whereas the ancient Greeks sought harmony between mind and body, modern living has destroyed that perfect synthesis and left us with an unhealthy disposition. A family prepare for the taxi that honks outside, but the stout father cannot do up his collar button, his son cannot strike a match, his wife knocks things over, his daughter fusses with her gloves and the baby cries. Explanations for their nervousness ensue: sedentary education, industrialization, mechanization, the frenetic pace of urban living (a fragmented and accelerating montage of speeding transport and rushing crowds) and the harmful pursuits of late-night drinking and smoking. In contrast, a seven-shot sequence reconstructs the ideal world of the ancient

Greek gymnasium—nearly nude, fit males in outdoor athletic competition with only the briefest glimpse of philosophical debate pushed to the corners of the frame. It is the body culture of the ancient Greeks, the documentary argues, that will lead Germany's way back to strength and beauty (Cowan 2008: 158–167; Rippey 2010).

Documentary films often articulate a vital connection between antiquity and modernity, and between cinema and the past that it documents. *Ways to Strength and Beauty* was produced by the Weimar Republic's leading film studio as one of its "cultural films" whose express purpose was to edify. It was scripted and overseen by a physician and put to use all the conventions of documentary (direct address to spectators, instructional rhetoric, reportage, analysis and dramatic reconstruction). Ancient Greece is given a therapeutic function in returning to health a citizen-body and a nation that had been exhausted by war (Rippey 2010: 183–184). One scene offers an amusing lesson on the need to establish this new relationship with classical antiquity. An intertitle states that it is not enough to study and admire the works of the ancient Greeks. We now find ourselves in a museum whose visitors are ushered to a bench before the statue of a nude Aphrodite. The camera pans in close up the facial reactions of the overdressed, unsightly hotchpotch of Weimar citizens: admiration, consternation, lust, aversion, bewilderment and disinterest. The statue then magically comes alive and swivels to display her physical beauty to the camera with a smile. The subsequent intertitle instructs: "We ourselves must strive to emulate the ancient Greeks." The film's spectators are thus ordered to jettison a passive, contemplative relationship to images of classical bodies and adopt instead an active, performative one. But since the animation of classical statues is a trick frequently played by early cinema, the ending of the scene takes on a self-reflexive quality (Cowan 2008: 159–160): if ancient Greece is to escape the stasis of the museum and enter our lives, it will be through the motivation motion pictures like this one provide.

The rest of the documentary accumulates evidence that the classical ideal of body cultivation is re-emerging in a wide variety of modern practices. Yet, along the way, one substantial sequence stands out for the difference of its form and content, a difference that exceeds the responsibility to improve the health of the nation. In the final section on outdoor pursuits, an intertitle declares: "In ancient times bathing played a more important role in social life than today." The dramatic re-enactment of Roman bathing that follows is justified through a surfeit of authority not provided for the earlier scene at the Greek gymnasium or for a brief re-enactment of the Judgment of Paris: archaeology (shots of the Baths of Caracalla); museology (involvement of the Berlin Museum); science (exactitude of the reconstruction); and art (scenes of the apodyterium, tepidarium and frigidarium replicate the gorgeously

detailed antiquarianism of paintings by Alma-Tadema). What follows, however, is decidedly private. Slave girls playing ball by a lake are disturbed by a piece of dialogue: "The mistress has ordered her bath!" Having entered an ornate neo-classical villa, the mistress is slowly and completely undressed and then rubbed with oils. A sense of touch is strongly stimulated here for film viewers: the camera moves in closer as the Roman lady is bathed, water splashes skin that glistens, disembodied hands caress her naked flesh. At the communal frigidarium, a visual contrast is established between the immobile, clothed neo-classical statues that adorn it and the naked women who splash about inside. In the gardens, after fetishizing close-ups of hair, face and thigh (the latter scraped with a strigil and further oiled), the camera watches the mistress fall asleep in almost post-coital exhaustion.

Classicizing the body on screen can serve hygienic and moral goals (as it does explicitly in *Ways to Strength and Beauty*), but it can also justify nudity for film censorship boards at the same time as it titillates (Herdegen 2012: 155). It can even help satisfy the pornographic itch, as when Italian viewers were invited to watch scenes of modern sexual activity under cover of the suggestive title *Saffo e Priapo* (1921–1922). A longer version of the Roman bath house sequence in *Ways to Strength and Beauty* survives as a separate print in the Australian national film archive. In it, and in no other version of the documentary I have seen, a tall African eunuch exoticized by his wild hair, striped tunic, chest band and necklace stands screen left during the tepidarium scene. The film safely enacts through him (as sexual and racial other) the salacious gaze on female flesh that it must not explicitly permit its spectators. This "Roman Bath House" print may survive independently because the sequence in its entirety was excised from the Australian export copy of *Ways to Strength and Beauty* or because it once belonged to a collector among segments of film compiled for private enjoyment.

Intermediality and the Art of Cinema: *The Slave of Phydias* (*L'Esclave de Phidias*, Gaumont, France, 1917, dir. Léonce Perret)

On screen, ancient Greece can operate as heritage, precedent, analogy or symptom, but it can also function as symbol. The closing intertitles of *The Slave of Phydias* (*L'Esclave de Phidias*) bid nostalgic farewell to Athens as "mother country of all art," "land of Beauty and of Love." By means of its poetic style and the many inter-medial connections it makes between cinema and other arts (including sculpture, music, dance, architecture and painting), the French film

encourages an aesthetic response to its representation of the ancient world.[6] Each of the protagonists is associated with an artistic medium: Phidias is a sculptor; his slave Callyce sings and plays the lyre; his wife Quinta enjoys watching dancers perform. Most scenes are shot on location and utilize the ornate gardens of a neo-classical villa dramatically situated high above the coastline of southern France (Figure 3.4). The director produces another of the "pictorialist melodramas" for which he was acclaimed (Abel 1998: 339–342 and 380–388; Thompson 2004a: 260–264); visual composition, spatial patterning and beautiful décor evoke the glamorous antiquarianism of Alma-Tadema's paintings. The Gaumont studio advertised the film as "an antique poem" (*La Presse*, January 3, 1919), by virtue of the director's syntax of emblematic moving images: characters appear romantically dappled in sunlight, quizzically reflected in rippling lily ponds, coldly mirrored in rain water that has collected on the villa's smooth paving stones, or starkly isolated in moonlit silhouette against a contrastingly sparkling sea. While at the premiere held at the Gaumont Palace early in 1917, a celebrated composer directed an especially commissioned score for soloists, a choir and full orchestra to accompany this "aesthetic symphony" to tragic Hellas (*Hebdo-Film*, February 10, 1917).

Figure 3.4 Phydias is drawn by his slave's lyre-playing. *The Slave of Phydias* (*L'Esclave de Phidias*; 1917).

L'Esclave de Phidias is not an historical epic on the public role of the sculptor and the colossal religious works he created to celebrate the imperial power of the Athenian state. Here Phidias is attempting unsuccessfully to chisel a statue of the goddess of love with the beautiful Callyce as his model and finds himself, as a result of marital jealousy, falsely charged with embezzlement and sentenced to exile (charge and exile are both politically motivated in the ancient sources). The two-reel film draws on a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tradition for Phidias that, in theatre, ballet, burlesque and film, depicted him as bleak counterpoint to Pygmalion (Monrós-Gaspar 2013: 15–16). In that tradition, a modern-day sculptor hopelessly pursues a cold-hearted actress who models for him. He dreams of a Phidias who is obsessed with his sculpted women, refuses to part with them, and finds that they come alive only to reject the Athenian sculptor for his wealthy patron. The contemporary sculptor foolishly fails to heed the otherworldly warning that almost all women have hearts of marble. In the French film of 1917, however, what matters is not the creativity and desires of a sculptor but those of his model—the poor slave who entitles the film.

The sculpture on which Phidias is working never comes alive; instead it remains largely off-screen and unfinished throughout the film. It is the sculptor's model who creates in him true desire through her physical beauty, exquisite music and warm love. Female flesh is not made out of marble but replaces it, as is highlighted when a mask placed over the camera momentarily cuts everything else out of the frame except Callyce posing with a sunny smile. *L'Esclave de Phidias* thus departs from the conventions of early cinematography and its trick animation of statuary and suggests self-reflexively that, like Phidias, film spectators now have access to a new type of engagement with antiquity— simultaneously artistic, impassioned and vital. Through its intermediality and its focus on Callyce, the film also embodies cinema as a feminine and democratic art that subsumes all others. At the end, it is this "consoling beauty" that Phidias still possesses when he is forced to say goodbye to Athens and face oblivion. A poignant conclusion, and a focus on suffering, loss and exile, that was well suited to the French film's troubled period of production during the First World War.

Self-Reflection: *La conquête des Gaules* (*The Conquest of Gaul*, Les Films YDB, France, 1922, dir. Marcel Yonnet and Yann B. Dyl)

Classical antiquity proves to be a productive vehicle for silent cinema to reflect upon itself as a medium. *The Conquest of Gaul* (1922) deserves close scrutiny because it is unusual for its time—a feature-length rather than short

comedy, a gentle farce rather than slapstick and a satire on film-making rather than a parody of the historical genre such as the American *Friends, Romans and Leo* (1917), *Romans and Rascals* (1918) or *Cleopatsy* (1918). Yet it is frustratingly difficult to interpret because it survives in a Parisian archive in poor condition: there are no intertitles, only marks to indicate where they should be inserted; a few intertitles from another film momentarily intrude; the print may be out of sequence in places (Usai 2000: 134–137 helpfully discusses the deceptiveness of prints like this).[7] However, the published synopsis, reviews and interviews with the cast aid preliminary interpretation of the comedy's narrative. It opens with a shot of the camera being used to film the embedded historical epic, into which peer the cinematographer and the director, who is costumed as a Gallic supernumerary (Figure 3.5). A private sponsor offers only 10 percent of the proposed cost of production and, consequently, a proportionately humbler epic must be made. We observe the poor director having to make constant changes to his shooting script as he is beset by further obstacles and the pressure of time: an actor is injured; the bedraggled and depressed aristocrat cast as Julius Caesar struggles to turn in a robust performance; the weather is often cold and wet; the props man is as diminutive as his resources which, piled on a single cart, get stuck in the mud; the cast's clothes are stolen while they shoot a scene; the director tearfully discovers that, while he has been overwhelmed by these problems, his wife has fallen for the guitar playing of the actor cast as the Gallic chieftain Vercingetorix. At the end of the comedy, the director can finally relax because his epic has been completed (even including the conventional scene of exotic dancing). We are all too aware, however, that it has been competed only through improvisation and chance.

The Conquest of Gaul is an affectionate and knowing satire on French cinema. The character of the epic's cameraman is played by Léonce-Henri Burel, the celebrated cinematographer who directed photography for most of the films made by Abel Gance (he also co-authored, co-directed and co-photographed this comedy: *Cinémagazine* 42, October 19, 1923). Jean Toulout, who was at the time an activist in the Actor's Union, plays the character of the epic's director. In an interview conducted with *Mon Ciné* (September 21, 1922, p. 3) about this self-reflexive feature, Toulout is introduced as a defender of French over American cinema, despite the former's poor organization, defective equipment and over hasty production. His account presents the film as comic expression of a serious concern that, because French cinema was still operating after the war with an artisanal rather than an industrial mode of production, it was in danger of being overwhelmed by Hollywood imports (Thompson 2004b: 351–354). A film about making an historical epic works well as an amusing means of contributing

Figure 3.5 *The Conquest of Gaul* opens with a shot of the camera being used to film the embedded historical epic, into which peer the cinematographer and the director, who is costumed as a Gallic supernumerary. *The Conquest of Gaul* (*La conquête des Gaules*; 1922).

to that concern because the genre required the greatest commitment of money, equipment, personnel and time. The choice of the conquest of Gaul— the foundation story of France— also sits well with the drive in this period by French film-makers to aid national reconstruction through the production of historical works on emblematic French figures, such as Joan of Arc or Napoleon (Véray 2005: 334–338). Vercingetorix was a French national hero who thus lends to French film-making, even when played for laughs, the pose and rhetoric of heroic struggle, suffering, sacrifice and nobility in the face of defeat.

The Transition to Sound

The histories and the myths of classical antiquity were projected onto the screens of silent cinema, its art and architecture informed the decoration of neo-classical picture palaces and its literary genres gave rise to the category of the cinematic "epic" as well as providing source material for adaptation. Beginning around 1911, however, critical thinking about silent cinema had also connected it back explicitly to the ancient arts of painting, drama and

sculpture in order to acclaim it as the amalgam of them all, and even their superior in its global address across classes and cultures (Michelakis and Wyke 2013: 7–8). Essential to this conception of the modern medium's artistry was silence, despite any music that might accompany screenings (Usai 2000: xviii). Silence differentiated cinema from literature and theatre and gave it legitimacy as optical rhythm and universal pantomime. The introduction of the spoken word seemed, therefore, to undermine any claim that it might be a uniquely all-encompassing art. Instead sound appeared to confine film to national languages and cultures, and to reduce the moving image to mere mechanical mimesis (Bertellini 2002: 41). No wonder then that shortly before film industries issued synchronized sound versions of *Cabiria*, *Helena* or *Ben-Hur*, classical antiquity was again called upon to celebrate a new stage in film-making and raise it above the parochial and the mechanical. In *Photoplay* for February 1929 (35.3, p. 12) it is a colossal god sporting laurel wreath and chiton who advertises to the modern city beneath him the marvel of Warner's talking picture (as noted by Williams 2013: 205–206). Once again, paradoxically and inventively, it is antiquity that elevates cinema to the status of an art of benefit to the modern world.

NOTES

1. I am here drawing on the version of *Quo Vadis?* (1924) that was restored by the Nederlands Filmmuseum in collaboration with the Fondazione Cineteca Nazionale (Milan) and the Fondazione Scuola Nazionale di Cinema – Cineteca Nazionale (Rome). It has English intertitles. I have also had access to the version in Cineteca Nazionale that contains the original Italian intertitles. Scodel and Betterworth (2009: 60–61 and 228–229) note that the print preserved in the American film archive at UCLA manifests some minor variation in its intertitles and censors one of the more prurient scenes. The film was first exhibited in Rome in March 1925, but registered for release in 1924.
2. The little surviving footage can be viewed on YouTube. I am most grateful to Phillip Dye for granting me digital access to his photographic reconstruction of the lost film – achieved through a carefully ordered montage set to music of numerous production stills into which has been inserted the intertitles outlined in Adrian Johnson's original scenario. In personal correspondence, Dye notes that several different versions of the scenario exist and that the synopsis provided in *Motion Picture Classic* (December 1917) differs again regarding the ending of the film. The scenario to which I have had access is from the Twentieth Century Fox Collection in the University of Southern California Cinematic Arts Library (Box 41, item 1464).
3. The version of the film to which I have had access is that commercially available in the four-disc "collector's edition" of William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), first released by

Warner Home Video in 2005. This restoration reproduces the color tints and two-strip Technicolor sequences of the original and is accompanied by an orchestral soundtrack composed by Carl Davis. I also saw this version screened at the Royal Festival Hall in 2012 accompanied by the London Philharmonia orchestra. According to Usai (2000: 60–61), this and all other viewing copies currently available are taken from late prints produced in the sound era, despite the recovery of a master from an earlier generation of prints. I am very grateful to Kevin Brownlow for providing me with access to an episode of the 1980 television documentary *Hollywood: A Celebration of American Silent Film* in which technical aspects of the chariot race scene are discussed (episode 11, "Trick of the Light"), and to Jon Solomon for access to his monograph on the *Ben-Hur* phenomenon prior to publication.

4. The restoration of *Helen of Troy* has only been available since November 2015 on a DVD made by Filmmuseum Munich. The DVD contains much useful information on the film and its restoration from various export prints, as well as stills and souvenir programs from a variety of countries. Stefan Drössler of the Münchner Stadtmuseum/Filmmuseum generously gave permission for publication of the still.
5. Versions of the documentary can be found on YouTube. I have not had access to the original print in the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv, Berlin. However, the British Film Institute National Archive holds a re-edited sound version that I have seen. Released in 1932 as *Back to Nature*, the intertitles have been replaced with a spoken lecture in English. A segment of the film, fuller than that in either the silent or the sound versions and with English intertitles, survives in the Australian National Film and Sound Archive (Canberra, NFSA 19355). The Canberra segment, originally identified as [A Roman Bath House, c. 1927 UK] has now been linked to the German documentary on the basis of my identification.
6. A print survives in the British Film Institute National Archive, which I have also seen screened at the Cinema Museum (London) in 2015 and the Bologna film festival Cinema Ritrovato in 2016. Until now it was identified in the British Film Institute catalogue as an Italian film of unknown authorship. I am very grateful to Bryony Dixon, Curator of Silent Film at the British Film Institute, for permission to take and publish the screenshot.
7. The print survives at La Cinémathéque française. I am very grateful to the archive for permission to screen the print at the Cinema Museum (London) in 2015, for access to a digitalized research copy and for permission to take and publish a screenshot. Members of the audience in 2015 offered helpful speculations about the film and Kevin Brownlow kindly drew my attention to some of the few contemporary discussions of it in the French press.

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CHAPTER FOUR

The Resurgence of Epics in the 1950s: Classical Antiquity in Post-war Hollywood

Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos

An Industry in Crisis

In the years following the end of the Second World War, while most of Europe stood in ruins and the descent of the Iron Curtain across the continent forced the Soviet Union and East Bloc countries into a state of global isolation, the United States enjoyed phenomenal economic prosperity. Although the repatriation of millions of veterans gave rise to a domestic paranoia of return to pre-war Depression conditions, the American economy entered a phase of rapid growth which had a profound impact on demographics and transformed the metropolitan landscape radically. The automobile industry successfully converted back to manufacturing cars for use by civilians in 1945, after suspending commercial operations for almost three years to place itself at the service of the national defense program and supply the US army with combat support vehicles (trucks, jeeps and tanks), as well as with bombs, torpedoes and airplanes produced in massive numbers under contracts issued by the Roosevelt administration. The widespread ownership of cars encouraged many Americans to abandon the center of big cities and migrate to the suburbs in pursuit of a single-family home with plenty of outdoor space. Other factors also contributed to the explosion of the suburban population in the post-war era: the rise in median household income, the sharp increase in birth rate

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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(the so-called "baby boom"), and the construction of thousands of miles of high-speed roads that made living distant from one's place of work possible.

Featuring amenities, such as shopping malls, fast-food restaurants and mega grocery stores, suburban areas attracted more and more residents, leading urban centers to a fast-paced decline. This sudden shift in the metropolitan dynamics had a direct impact on the consuming attitudes and leisure habits of Americans. As people fled from the cities where the majority of movie theaters were located, their amusement needs were catered for by a new technology that became increasingly popular and affordable for families: television. Although before the war it was considered an experimental gadget, broadcasting nothing but test patterns and music, with mass production following the inauguration of transcontinental service in 1951 television quickly became the dominant form of family entertainment, displacing another box, the radio, as the living room centerpiece across the United States. So enthusiastically did American consumers embrace the new medium that 90 percent of households owned a television set by the end of the 1950s (Balio 1985b: 401; Stubbs 2013: 85).

Hollywood studios began to fear that the change in the watching ethos caused by the invasion of television into American homes might prove catastrophic for cinema's monopolization of screen entertainment. This phobia found a precedent in the Paramount Decree of 1948, which dealt a crushing blow to the motion picture industry by ending the oligopolistic system of film distribution and exhibition. Major studios—also known as the Big Five (Loew's/MGM, Paramount Pictures, Twentieth-Century Fox, Warner Bros., and RKO Radio Pictures)—owned their own cinema chains, each of them concentrated in different parts of the country, and dictated which films would be shown and in what order they would appear in the program. "Unaffiliated" (independent) theaters were forced to rent a large number of a studio's releases as a unit, a practice known as "block booking." They also practiced "blind bidding," which meant that exhibitors agreed to the licensing terms for pictures prior to their trade screening. Under this scheme, studios were able to "parcel out second-rate product along with A-class features and star vehicles" (Schatz 1988: 39). Since they had no bargaining power, out-of-network cinemas were compelled to pay for unwanted titles in order to secure a high-profile film with which they sought to boost their admission revenues. Ruling against Paramount Pictures, the Supreme Court unanimously outlawed this preferential treatment and mandated the disintegration of theater circuits, terminating the cartel imposed on exhibitors by the five top distributing firms.

Studio executives feared that the collapse of the old system might create an opportunity for television to emerge as the primary source of mass

entertainment and conquer America. At first, this anxiety was dismissed in trade publications that saw the new medium as a potential distribution outlet for the film industry. However, the symbiotic relationship between Hollywood and the broadcasting industry came to an end rather quickly. As people preferred to stay home and watch television for free from the comfort of their living rooms, cinemas started to lose viewers by the millions, and box-office revenues suffered a seismic plunge. As drive-in theaters became the defining new feature of the suburban landscape and spread across the country, by early 1953 6,000 conventional four-wall cinemas had been forced to close their doors for lack of attendance (Balio 1985b: 401–402; Chrissochoidis 2013: 23, 73). A fierce competition thus began, described by film historians as "a duel of screens" (Wood 1975: 169). Hollywood responded to this challenge by implementing a series of cutting-edge technologies in an attempt to create an unparalleled viewing experience that the small, black-and-white television screen could not replicate. From principal photography to projection, the motion picture industry underwent a radical transformation in order to recapture the interest of audiences and lure ticket-buyers back to theaters.

Revolutionizing the Big Screen

Since television was in black and white, studios increased their color output rapidly, from 21 percent of the releases in 1951 to 61 percent in 1955 (Balio 1985b: 425; Hall and Neale 2010: 140). However, Technicolor, which was introduced in 1935 and was the dominant process, was already a novelty of the past by the early 1950s and was soon replaced by other, less cumbersome and costly technologies, such as Eastmancolor and its variants. To further distinguish itself from its rival, Hollywood started to invest in three-dimensional and widescreen formats, aspiring to offer viewers a compelling illusion of realistic participation in the action and emphasize the limitations in the pleasure derived from watching the flat, monaural television screen. A major such attraction—presented to the public at New York's Broadway Theatre on September 30, 1952 as a history-making event, with reserved seating, printed programs, and audience members dressed in formal attire—was a pioneering yet expensive system of filming and exhibition called Cinerama. It involved a set of three cameras sharing a single shutter that captured images projected subsequently onto a gigantic, curved screen by means of three synchronized projectors. The panoramic effect created through this projection method was enhanced with the use of multi-track stereophonic sound system consisting of eight microphones and speakers, five placed behind the screen and three at the back of the theater.

Seeking to compete against Cinerama with a technique whose cost would make it less prohibitive for theater exhibitors to install, in early 1952 Twentieth Century-Fox acquired exclusive rights to Anamorphoscope. This filming process was patented by French inventor Henri Chrétien in 1927, but failed to find a market on either side of the Atlantic before the war. Renamed CinemaScope, the new method relied on two anamorphic (shape-shifting) lenses: one attached to a camera to compress a wide-angle panoramic image onto standard 35 mm film and another one attached to a projector to stretch out the frame of the film into an aspect ratio sometimes as big as 2.66:1. The aesthetic result was a visual appearance twice as wide—the typical aspect ratio known as the "Academy format" was 1.33:1—with finer pictorial qualities and greater depth of field that created a sense of intensified audience participation. More characters and objects could be depicted on screen, and there was more space for inclusion of suggestive details and subplots. Compared to Cinerama, CinemaScope was affordable and easy for studios and cinemas to adopt because the lenses were retrofitted onto existing filming cameras and projecting machines. It did not require a serious remodeling of film houses or the purchase of intricate new technology. The only major expense was in exhibition, for movie theaters had to be equipped with a large "Miracle Mirror Screen" that was slightly curved to fill the entire proscenium arch, as well as with audio system that consisted of three speakers placed in strategic positions behind the screen—one in the center and the other two on either side of it—to reproduce the three-dimensional sound recorded on magnetic film.

As a showcase for the new technology with which it aimed to captivate audiences and recoup its lost revenues, Fox chose a "prestige picture" entitled *The Robe* (Figure 4.1), which was based on Lloyd C. Douglas's immensely popular novel of the same title that rose to number one on the New York Times Fiction Best Seller list on November 22, 1942 and held that position until March 7, 1943. *The Robe* is a historical epic set in ancient Rome and Judaea in AD 32–37, a period spanning the final years of the reign of emperor Tiberius (AD 14–37) and the beginning of Caligula's brief rule (AD 37–41). It narrates the story of Marcellus Gallio, a fictitious Roman tribune who commands a unit appointed in Palestine and converts to Christianity after he wins in a dice game the robe worn by Jesus before his crucifixion and experiences the mystic powers of the holy garment. To direct the film, Fox chose an emblematic Hollywood figure, the German-born Henry Koster, who had been credited with saving Universal from bankruptcy with *Three Smart Girls* (1936). He received an Academy Award nomination for *The Bishop's Wife* (1947) and in 1952 he directed *My Cousin Rachel* for Fox, the first American film of Richard Burton, who went on to star in *The Robe*.

At every public opportunity prior to the film's release, Spyros P. Skouras, Fox's Greek-born president (1942–1962), took pride in proclaiming that

Figure 4.1 A scene from the Twentieth Century-Fox production *The Robe* (1953, dir. Henry Koster). Reproduced with permission of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

CinemaScope was Hollywood's greatest innovation since the introduction of sound. (Fox and Warner Bros. were the first studios to experiment with that technology back in 1927.) Not accidentally, among the first industry outsiders to receive news about the acquisition of the rights to Chrétien's novelty was the recently elected President, Dwight Eisenhower. Skouras, who believed that CinemaScope was "an affirmation of America's industrial strength and artistic supremacy in its ideological and political rivalry with the Soviet Union" (Chrissochoidis 2013: 10), wrote a letter to Eisenhower, dated February 6, 1953, to inform him of the studio's efforts to ensure the competitiveness of the nation's fifth-largest industry and safeguard its financial viability:

> I thought you would be interested in knowing that a revolutionary transition is occurring presently because Twentieth Century-Fox has acquired rights to a very simple and effective French photographic and projecting process called Anamorphoscope. This is a large screen process with a pronounced three-dimensional illusion to which the industry has shown an enthusiastic response.

> Because of its impact upon the entire amusement industry, our first picture with this process will be the well-known Lloyd C. Douglas novel, THE ROBE. This will be followed by all of our other important pictures. (Chrissochoidis 2013: 48).

Three days later, Skouras received a response from President Eisenhower: "I am interested in your plans for making "The Robe" in the new three-dimensional medium. Please keep me posted on developments" (Chrissochoidis 2013: 49).

The Robe had been announced for cinematic adaptation by RKO since the release of Douglas's bestseller. To turn the novel into a feature film, the studio hired Albert Maltz, winner of the 1938 O. Henry Award for short story of exceptional merit and recipient of an Honorary Academy Award for *The House I Live In* (1945). Maltz delivered to RKO's stenographic department a mimeographed script comprising 277 pages on August 21, 1945 and a pack of handwritten and typed revisions on September 20, 1946 (Wisconsin Historical Society [henceforth WHS], Albert Maltz Papers, Box 7, Folders 6–9). Because of the high cost involved in the visual recreation of the ancient world on screen, the picture remained in production limbo until 1952, when Fox finally purchased the rights and had the script revised by Philip Dunne. This change of scriptwriters was dictated by the fact that Maltz had meanwhile been blacklisted and denied employment for being one of the Hollywood Ten who refused to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities about their suspected involvement in the US Communist Party. Dunne cut Maltz's voluminous screenplay down to 141 pages (Smith 2007: 28) and was credited as the sole screenwriter when the film was released.

When the film changed hands, *The Robe* was scheduled for production in the traditional Academy ratio. However, after Fox acquired the rights to Chrétien's invention, shooting was postponed and the studio spent an additional $500,000 to have the sets rebuilt, raising the budget to $4.1 million (Solomon 1988: 85, 248) in order for the Roman epic to capitalize on the optical capabilities of the new technology in aesthetic and financial terms. Fox surrounded the film with enormous publicity during the pre-release period. A demonstration reel with select scenes from *The Robe* (as well as from *How to Marry a Millionaire*, also shot in CinemaScope and released in the same year) was shown to producers and exhibitors in Hollywood in March 1953, timed to coincide with the Academy Awards, and to exhibitors and critics in New York in April, receiving dithyrambic reviews. Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times*, for example, declared himself astonished by the fluid cutting and close-ups of *The Robe* segment and praised the "commendable fidelity and naturalness" of the images of the forthcoming picture (Lev 2006: 117).

To emphasize its status as high-class entertainment, as opposed to the television that was available to the masses, *The Robe* premiered at an exclusive venue, the (now demolished) 5,920-seat Roxy Theatre in New York (also called the "Cathedral of the Motion Picture") on September 16, 1953, proving to be an immense commercial success. With admissions set at $3, a top price that served as a marker of the capacity of the first film shot in CinemaScope to be a purveyor of loftier and more advanced spectacle, *The Robe* earned a box-office gross of $267,000 in its opening week alone, setting a world record (Hall and Neale 2010: 147–148). Soon thereafter, it went on general release at cinemas nationwide. By Christmas, it was playing at 254 movie theaters and received enthusiastic responses, such as the rave review from W. R. Wiklerson of *The Hollywood Reporter* who described it, apparently inspired by its biblical subject, as the "Moses" that could lead the motion picture industry "out of a film wilderness" (Lev 2006: 118). Justifying Fox's investment in CinemaScope, *The Robe* became the highest-grossing film in the studio's history at the time. It returned $17.5 million in domestic rentals and $25 million globally (Solomon 1988: 88), ranking second to *Gone with the Wind* in *Variety*'s annually updated chart (Hall and Neale 2010: 148).

The Robe holds an additional distinct position in the history of the ancient world on the big screen. It is the first epic to have a sequel, produced under the title *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954, dir. Delmer Daves) and shot in CinemaScope in the same sets used for *The Robe*. Accompanied by maximum publicity, *Demetrius and the Gladiators* was a massive commercial success, cementing its place as the fourth-top grossing film in the year of its theatrical release. It also stands out as the first Hollywood spectacular that received cross-media promotion. Fox produced two trailers, of 20 and 60-seconds in length respectively, specifically for television use with excerpted footage, thus departing from the customary practice of conveying star and narrative information for a forthcoming feature through a series of unanimated slides. The *Exhibitor's Campaign Book* (Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Pressbook Collection, *Demetrius and the Gladiators*), urges theater owners to take advantage of this new merchandizing method through a product announcement that complicates the supposedly combative and dichotomized relationship between the film and the broadcasting industries. Instead of engaging in a polemic, the text recognizes an advantage in the infiltration of television into the American households and describes the new medium as an important advertising channel:

> For the first time Twentieth Century-Fox is proud to announce the availability of TWO free television trailers to support your playdate.... Join the modern show-wise exhibitors who have proven the efficacy of television—the medium

> in the home—to get them out of the house and into the theater. Join forces with TV, it's the greatest door-to-door, parlor-to-parlor salesman ever born or invented. And it can do for you, quickly and graphically, the kind of pre-selling job that guarantees they'll be lined up when you open "Demetrius and the Gladiators" (p. 10).

The commercial success of *The Robe* and its sequel prompted Fox to release a cycle of epic films set in the ancient Mediterranean world in the next ten years, starting with a screen adaptation of Mika Waltari's best-selling historical novel *The Egyptian* (1954, dir. Michael Curtiz) and ending with the notorious *Cleopatra* (1963, dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz) that almost led the studio to bankruptcy (For releases during the intervening period, see Llewellyn-Jones 2009: 567). All other major Hollywood studios followed the lead set by Fox and produced lavish spectaculars, just as the trend of sequels inaugurated by *Demetrius and the Gladiators* found an emulator in the Italian pepla made in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Recently, the trend has seen a revival in *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014, dir. Noam Murro), the successor of the smash hit *300* (2006, dir. Zack Snyder).

The First Blockbuster

In addition to embracing pioneering photography and exhibition technologies, another way in which Hollywood responded to the post-war box-office recession was by bringing an end to the system of mass production that had dominated the industry for decades. The number of films released on an annual basis was drastically curtailed, from about 300 in the period 1951–1953 to 225 in 1954 and below 200 for the first time in 1959 (Hall and Neale 2010: 155). Studios now aimed to produce fewer pictures that aspired to attract viewers back to cinemas by delivering something that the rival medium could not afford: a visual narrative of epic proportions. In the embryonic days of television, most network programs were made on a shoestring budget, were typically half an hour in length, and lacked the production values and technical sophistication of Hollywood movies. The film industry sought to regain its lost market through an avalanche of "big" pictures that would put the small screen's ascetic aesthetics to shame by offering audiences a level of spectacle never experienced before in terms of running time (minimum 2½ hours), cost ($4 million and above), and most importantly iconographic magnitude.

Searching for stories that would be ideal for monumental recreation, filmmakers repeatedly turned to the ancient Mediterranean world for inspiration. The impetus for this trend, which will reach its apogee in the late 1950s

and early 1960s, was the tremendous commercial success of Paramount's *Samson and Delilah* (1949), directed by the master of spectaculars, Cecil B. DeMille. With a budget of $4 million and domestic earnings of over $11 million according to *Variety*'s annual chart (Schatz 1999: 392; Richards 2008: 99; Barton 2010: 174; Shearer 2010: 237; for different figures drawn from the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences archives, see Halle and Neale 2010: 136, 288 n. 11), the biblical epic became the highest-grossing film in the studio's history as of that date, and the box-office leader of its decade. As the first film to return more than $5 million in rentals since the end of the war, *Samson and Delilah* revived the interest of the Big Five in a genre that had generated only three titles since the beginning of the talkie era: *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) and *Cleopatra* (1934), both directed by DeMille and distributed by Paramount, and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935), directed by the creators of the original *King Kong* (1933), Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper, under the aegis of RKO.

A year after the phenomenal box-office performance of *Samson and Delilah*, Fox followed the pattern by releasing another picture inspired by the Old Testament, *David and Bathsheba*, directed by Henry King. It was named the top-grossing film of 1951 by *Variety* and earned the title "colossal" from the magazine for its scale of spectacle and lavish expenditure (Halle and Neale 2010: 137). Later in the same year, MGM entered the big picture competition with the historical epic *Quo Vadis*. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy—who gained international acclaim through numerous productions, one of which was *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)—MGM's release is the first sound adaptation of Henryk Sienkiewicz's bestseller of the same title. The novel was originally published in episodic form between 1894 and 1896 in three dailies representing the three constituent parts of Poland at the time: the *Gazeta Polska* for the Russian sector, the *Czas* for the Austrian territory, and the *Dziennik Poznański* for the Prussian partition. It was subsequently released as a book and was translated into several languages, selling 600,000 copies in the United States alone in the first 18 months of its publications. It brought Sienkiewicz global renown and contributed to his winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1905.

Set in AD 64–68, the last part of Nero's autocratic reign, *Quo Vadis* dramatizes the persecutions of early Christians and the emperor's pyromania through the romantic relationship of Marcus Vinicius, a fictitious military commander, with an elite Roman girl named Lygia who has renounced her ancestral paganism and has secretly converted to the new religion. The Latin title—contrary to previous cinematic retellings, the 1951 spectacular omits the question mark in the title of the source text—stems from an anecdote narrated in the second-century apocryphal *Acts of Peter* 35. As

the apostle was fleeing from Rome to avoid the tortures to which Nero subjected Christians, a vision of the resurrected Jesus carrying the cross appeared to him on the Via Appia. Peter is said to have asked: *Domine, quo vadis?* ("Lord, where are you going?"). Christ reproachfully replied: "I am going to Rome to be crucified anew." Ashamed of his faintheartedness, Peter turned around and made his way back to Rome to suffer his own martyrdom.

With a record budget of $7,623,000 and a running time of just under three hours, *Quo Vadis* received an equally hyperbolic amount of publicity upon release. For example, a giant trade press advertisement in *The New York Times* proclaimed pompously: "Your eyes have never beheld such sights! The world's most wicked empire, in all its pagan grandeur!" *Life Magazine*, in turn, in line with marketing conventions, made use of the superlative to describe MGM's multimillion dollar release for its readers as "The most colossal movie that you are likely to see for the rest of your lives" (Holston 2012: 111; on the film's promotion and merchandise tie-ins, see further Wyke 1997:110–111; Hall and Neale 2010: 137–139; Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 9–10; Stubbs 2013: 95). *Quo Vadis* reached the big screen on November 8, 1951. It opened simultaneously at two landmark Broadway theaters: the *Capitol*, where it ran continuously, and the *Astor* on a reserved-seat, two-performance-a-day basis. The choice was far from being accidental. The same venues and the same policies were used by MGM for the world premiere of *Gone with the Wind* in 1939. Furthermore, back in 1913, at a time at which the *Astor* switched between live theater and motion picture exhibitions, it was leased for the US premiere of the 1913 Italian silent version of Sienkiewicz's novel directed by Enrico Guazzoni (Abel 2006: 35; Bloom 2007: 15).

By the end of 1952, *Quo Vadis* grossed over $21 million, almost half of which came from the foreign market, leading *Variety* to borrow the military term "blockbuster" to describe its box-office triumph. As Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale (2010: 139) note:

> Borrowing a term from World War II—the name once used to describe a heavy bomb, one of the Allies' key weapons in the carpet bombing of Germany—the journal reintroduced it into another context of conflict: between studios and exhibitors, between the cinema and television, and between the film industry and the declining audience interest. This new "blockbuster"—a film designed to make a big impact on the box office, one capable of generating exceptionally large revenues partly by virtue of its exceptional production values—came to be seen as the industry's principal weapon in this peacetime "war," and the term quickly passed into trade and public vocabulary to become all but ubiquitous by the mid-1950s.

With familiar subjects appropriated from history and religion that appealed to a wide audience, both domestically and overseas, large-scale spectacles typically guaranteed a huge return on the investment made in them. In addition to being a pretty reliable market niche, they also brought prestige to major studios, enhancing their status among their Hollywood competitors. In other words, the splendor of spectacle became a metaphor for the power of the studios themselves.

A Galaxy of International Stars

Films set in the past required vast amounts of money to be produced. The elaborate sets and lavish costumes designed to recreate the perceived grandeur and exotic locations of the ancient world on screen, along with the hundreds, sometimes thousands, of extras deployed in the reenactment of pivotal battles and public spectacles involving enormous crowds (e.g., triumphal processions, gladiatorial combats, chariot races, crucifixions of Christians in the arena) inflated the budget of epic films to astronomical proportions. *Quo Vadis* is the very epitome of Hollywood extravaganza from the early 1950s. According to the press book of the film, for the "authentic" reconstruction of ancient Rome the studio utilized 32,000 costumes, 15,000 sandals, 450 horses, 63 lions, and two cheetahs (Morey 2008: 49; Schubert 2015: 69). The promotional booklet of *Alexander the Great* (1956), Hollywood's inaugural treatment of the life and conquests of the king of Macedon, scripted and directed by Robert Rossen for United Artists and filmed entirely in Spain, places an equal amount of emphasis upon numbers and zeros to cause a sensation among moviegoers: 6,000 infantry and 350 cavalry men, all drawn from the Spanish army, were dressed in ancient panoplies and fought as Greek and Persian soldiers before the cameras. The prop department had to prepare inter alia "5,000 bows and arrows, 1,000 shields, 5,000 spears, 500 tents, 50 chariots, 2,000 suits of armor and 20 ramrods and war machines" (WHS, David Ffolkes Papers, Box 1, Folder 3 "Motion Pictures and Theater Programs").

Not rarely, this cinematic exercise in elephantiasis went off track on account of overruns in shooting caused by unforeseen events and disasters. For example, Warner Bros.' response to Hollywood's call for bigness was the epic *Helen of Troy* (1956), a reworking of Homer's *Iliad* shot in CinemaScope under the direction of Robert Wise—who will soon become a leading figure in the industry thanks to *West Side Story* (1961) and *The Sound of Music* (1965). The film was originally planned as an adaptation of John Erskine's bestseller *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1925), which was brought to the

big screen as a silent film of the same title in 1927 under the direction of Alexander Korda. Because of complications in obtaining the rights to Erskine's work (WHS, United Artists Collection, Series 1.7—Warner Bros. Contract and Copyright File, Box 32, Folder A5), the studio decided to produce a radical departure from the popular novel. Heralded in a review published in *Variety* on December 21, 1955 as the picture through which "the word 'spectacular' achieves its true meaning" (Gehring 2012: 166), *Helen of Troy* featured a staggering cast of 2,000 extras—raised to the incredible number of 30,000 in publicity material—and an impressive eighteen-unit, two-acre set, anachronistically inspired by Minoan palatial iconography (García 2008: 23), which reportedly took six months to build.

In the film's pressbook—accessed for the purposes of this essay through the website of the American Film Institute—the giant wooden horse (Figure 4.2) with which the Greeks infiltrated Troy is advertised as "The World's Largest 'Prop'." For its construction, as the booklet informs its reader, the studio used more than thirty full-grown trees (fir, beech, and poplar), more than a thousand

Figure 4.2 The Trojans dragging the giant wooden horse into the city. *Helen of Troy* (1956, dir. Robert Wise). Reproduced with permission of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

pounds of nails, as well as a wagonload of screws, wooden pegs, and iron rings. It was forty feet high and weighed more than eighty tons, featuring an air-conditioning system in its interior and built-in benches for the twenty-five Greek warriors who opened the gates of Troy and disarmed the guards who had remained sober after a night of Bacchanalian revelry. Ironically, the walls of Troy were consumed in flames before the scene with the sack of the city was shot. According to an article published in the daily edition of *Variety* on August 20, 1954, a fire razed eighty per cent of the exterior set that was eventually rebuilt, albeit not fully, at an additional cost. As a result, shooting was delayed, and the production went more than $1.5 million over its original $3 million budget and was placed under close financial scrutiny by Warner Bros. until principal photography was completed (Keenan 2007: 87; Gehring 2012: 168). Half a century later, history would repeat itself. The set of Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004), produced by the same studio, was wiped out by a hurricane in the Mexican state of Baja California (Galinsky 2007: 400).

What also contributed to the inflation of the production cost of epic films were the high salaries commanded by the actors cast in the leading roles. With their earnings from ticket sales in free fall, Hollywood studios could no longer afford to engage performers in multi-year contracts—typically seven years in length, renewed in biannual increments depending on the actor's performance at the box office (Becker 2008: 20). Whereas 742 players were under contract in 1947, the number dropped to 229 in 1956 (Balio 1985b: 402). This economic climate provided the stimulus for the reorganization of the way in which the star system operated. Many big names in the industry sought to cash in on their "marquee value"—the power of their name on theater signboards to draw audiences into exhibition venues—by signing contracts for individual projects. Some actors went so far as to form their own production companies upon the expiration of their contract with a given studio. As freelance artists, Hollywood actors gained greater leverage over their career and could decide on the films in which they wanted to be cast, as opposed to when they were under a long-term contract that guaranteed employment and provided prestige associated with a powerful studio, but forced them to accept any role that the studio thought suitable for them or to be loaned out to another studio. By hiring out themselves on a picture-by-picture basis, actors now managed to negotiate a higher remuneration that often included a percentage of the gross revenues.

To reduce production costs related to contractual demands made by American stars and prevent a hemorrhage of talent, as a plethora of actors started to cross over to the burgeoning television industry (Mann 1992; Negra 2002; Murray 2005; Becker 2009), studios added a wave of European performers, both senior and junior, to their payroll. The great majority came

from Britain: Peter Ustinov (Nero), Deborah Kerr (Lygia), Leo Genn (Petronius), Finlay Currie (Saint Peter) and Patricia Laffan (Poppaea) in *Quo Vadis*; Richard Burton (Marcellus), Jeanne Simmons (Diana), Michael Rennie (Saint Peter) and Torin Thatcher (Senator Gallio) in *The Robe*; Cedric Hardwicke (Priam), Stanley Baker (Achilles), Janet Scott (Cassandra) and Nora Swinburne (Hecuba) among many others in *Helen of Troy*. Not only did British actors speak the same language and therefore needed no voice coach or dubbing in post-production, but many of them had previous experience with "classical" roles through Shakespearean plays staged at Stratford-upon-Avon and the Old Vic in London. Mixing British theater with American film actors was a strategy with which Hollywood sought to enhance the prestige of its products. At the level of the narrative, studios exploited this amalgamation of talent from both sides of the Atlantic by often casting British actors as depraved Romans (e.g., Ustinov as Nero) and American actors as their ethical Christian opponents (e.g., Robert Taylor as Marcus Vinicius) (Wyke 1997: 23, 133; Joshel, Malamud and Wyke 2001: 8–9).

For *Helen of Troy*, director Robert Wise, who happened to be scouting for talent in Europe at the time, contracted players from Italy (Rossana Podestà in the titular role), France (Jacques Sernas as Paris and Brigitte Bardot as Andraste), and Ireland (Niall MacGinnis as Menelaus). But the epic film in which the internationalization of antiquity reached its apogee is *Alexander the Great*. A publicity handout from United Artists reports under the title "The Stars": "In order to film this spectacular story of Alexander's life, Robert Rossen combed the entire world for talent. He finally brought together in Spain the most international and celebrated cast in film history." Another flyer entitled "Story behind the Production" adds about the leads, with the same amount of marketing hyperbole:

> Rossen's cameras ranged over the entire expanse of Spain from the Guadarrama Mountains to the sandy plains of Barajas. The leading actors hail from all parts of the world: Richard Burton, from Wales; Claire Bloom, from England; Fredric March, from the United States; Danielle Darrieux, from France; Helmut Dantine, from Austria and Gustavo Rojo, from Uruguay. (WHS, The David Ffolkes Papers, Box 6, Folder 4).

This recruitment strategy had a double advantage for the motion picture industry. First, because they were mostly drawn from war-torn countries struggling to achieve economic stability, foreign actors were hired on more affordable terms than those that the leading American stars often sought to impose. The profit was higher for studios when payment was wired in the local, depreciated currency. Of course, not all the performers imported from

overseas were kept at the lower strata of Hollywood's salary hierarchy. Richard Burton, who was regarded as one of the best stage actors of his time, provides a fitting example of the way in which an outsider capitalized on his ascent to stardom and his "bankability"—his potential to guarantee high box-office returns. In 1952, Fox settled with London-based Hungarian director and producer Alexander Korda, to whom Burton was under contract at the time, to rent out the Welsh actor for three pictures, one of which was *The Robe*, for $50,000 per film. Following the commercial and critical success of the Roman epic, which earned Burton his second Academy Award nomination, the studio sought to tie the actor with a long-term contract. Burton was about to return to London to appear as Hamlet at the Old Vic for only £145 per week for the season. Fox offered him $1 million, plus percentages, for seven years for ten pictures, reducing the number to seven films to convince the actor to sign up (Sheppard 1974: 277–278; Bragg 1988: 84–90, 403–404; Williams 2012: 576). The third release in this series was *Alexander the Great* with Burton on loan to United Artists.

The second, and most important, advantage of this recruitment strategy is that it enabled the American motion picture industry to extend its hegemony over world cinema and give an international appeal to its products, facilitating their exportation to countries that had an audience eager to consume lavish spectacles, but did not have the means to produce multimillion dollar pictures with multiethnic casts. As Britain and continental Europe strived to rebuild their war-ravaged economies, capital channeled toward new film production became scarce. Latin America, on the other hand, was unaffected by war, but its film industry was introverted and movies were rarely circulated outside the region. Hollywood saw this lack of competition as the perfect opportunity to capture the lion's share of the global box-office to compensate for the decline in the domestic revenues. The following excerpt from the pressbook of *Helen of Troy* entitled "A Global Premiere" illustrates the importance attached to earnings from foreign rentals, as well as the use of a seminal story from classical antiquity as a vehicle—a new type of Trojan horse—for penetrating and conquering the overseas market:

> "Helen of Troy" is being welcomed by the world as no other motion picture has ever been welcomed. The phrase "world premiere" takes on a new significance. "Helen of Troy" is having a true world-wide premiere, a global event spanning fifty-six countries, hurdling language barriers and distances and time intervals. The motion picture will premiere to more than a half million people in one hundred and twenty-six of the world's most important cities. The film will be shown in twenty-three different languages simultaneously—to citizens of the world's great free nations in their own tongues.

> This booklet will be translated into many languages for the event which is a tribute to Homer, his *Iliad*, and to one of the most tumultuous stories the world has ever known.

As the United States sought to reinforce its geopolitical dominion over Europe and the northern hemisphere through the Marshall Plan (1948–1951) and the formation of the NATO in 1949, Hollywood films served as a form of soft diplomacy through which American values were disseminated to the rest of the world. In the words of President Harry Truman, motion pictures operated as "ambassadors of good will" (Guback 1985: 473), propagandizing the country's economic prosperity and its Cold War agenda through the equation of the American empire with the ancient powers on screen. It is no surprise that the list of "the world's great free nations" to which *Helen of Troy* opened on January 26, 1956 includes neither the Soviet Union nor any of the East Bloc countries.

Runaway Antiquity

To reduce the exorbitant production costs of epic films, Hollywood studios employed another, highly effective strategy: shooting on locations overseas, especially in European countries, whose currencies had been depreciated in the aftermath of the Second World War (Nikoloutsos 2013b: 267–269, with further bibliography). With the stark exception of *The Robe* and its sequel, as well as of *Julius Caesar*, a 1953 adaptation of Shakespeare's play of the same title directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and shot on MGM's backlot, all other spectaculars of this period were "runaway productions," i.e., intended for initial release in the United States, but filmed in foreign territories. Following the example of the medieval melodrama *Prince of Foxes* (1949), *Quo Vadis* is the first postwar epic set in antiquity that was produced in the Cinecittà Studios of Rome, taking over practically all of their facilities with its mammoth size. This occupation was perceived at the time "as a flagrant example of cinematic imperialism, since it meant that for around eighteen months Italian film production was virtually shut out" (Forgacs and Gundle 2007: 137–138). *Helen of Troy* is another ancient epic filmed entirely in Cinecittà, apart from the battle scenes that were lensed on an unoccupied stretch of land between the Italian capital and the port city of Ostia on the Tyrrhenian coast (Cary 1974: 64–83; Leemann 1995: 124–127; Thompson 1995: 65–67). *Alexander the Great*, in turn, was photographed at Madrid's Sevilla Film Studios and in numerous other outdoor locations throughout the country, including (as per its pressbook) Segovia, Malaga and Toledo.

The town of Rasacrifia served as the site for the reenactment of the siege of Granicus; on a hilltop overlooking the village of El Molar, Spanish workmen built the Macedonian palace of Pella (Figure 4.3) (WHS, Fredric March Papers, Box 3, Folder 1 "Press Releases: *Alexander the Great*").

Promoted by movie moguls as congruent with the mission of the Marshall Plan to re-erect the economy of the Allied nations, but criticized by film trade syndicates as an act tantamount to treason, runaway productions became a steadily growing trend in the industry. By the early 1960s, over a third of the American films were made outside the country (Stubbs 2013: 86). A number of reasons contributed to the rise of this postwar phenomenon. Minor companies like United Artists that did not possess their own lots in California could lease space for filming in Europe at much lower rates. Although the infrastructure of foreign studios was not always up to date and a lot of the equipment had to be shipped from Los Angeles, labor was

Figure 4.3 Spanish workmen construct a replica of the Macedonian palace at Pella on a hilltop overlooking the small town of El Molar in Spain for *Alexander the Great* (1956, dir. Robert Rossen). Reproduced with permission of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

considerably cheaper because local crews were not unionized. In addition, whereas the cost for the hiring of the legions of extras needed for large-scale spectacles was prohibitive back home, overseas their compensation was by far below the US minimum wage (hence runaway films were also known as "below-the-line productions"). Most importantly, in an effort to inject life into their moribund economy, European governments allowed American conglomerates free entry into their facilities on the agreement that only a portion from their annual exhibition earnings could be converted into dollars for repatriation. This restriction on currency outflow resulted in the accumulation of large sums of funds in blocked accounts that major studios reinvested in making new pictures on foreign locations. For the production of *Quo Vadis*, for example, MGM did not spend a single US dollar; it reportedly used frozen Italian lire and sterling (Forgacs and Gundle 2007: 137; Morey 2008: 46).

In promotional discourses, Hollywood studios disguised their financial reasons for outsourcing production work overseas under a veneer of authenticity, emphasizing as the motive behind their decision to shoot in Old World locales their purported commitment to the faithful reconstruction of the classical past on screen. The pressbook of *Alexander the Great*, for example, outlines the director's quest for a historically accurate site for his cinematic opus as follows:

> He headed for Europe. In Rome the visual side of "Alexander the Great" began to take shape in the form of a series of action sketches. From Rome, Rossen went to Greece in search of background material and the true atmosphere of the ancient Hellenistic empire.
>
> Both Greece and Yugoslavia invited Rossen to make his film in those countries. But, after a visit to Spain in the summer of 1954, he finally decided to make his production base in Madrid. For in Spain—with its vast stretches of uncultivated land—[which] is geographically so diverse, with its craggy mountain ranges and wooded hills, green plains and valleys, red earthy deserts and vine-covered slopes, golden beaches and wild coast line, locations could be found to match the equally varied landmarks of Alexander's life story (WHS, David Ffolkes Papers, Box 1, Folder 3 "Motion Pictures and Theater Programs").

Despite the effort of the booklet to convince the prospective moviegoer that Spain was chosen as an ideal location for the production on account of its morphology, *Alexander the Great* is a typical example of distortion, compression, and eclectic representation of the historical record on the big screen (Nikoloutsos 2008: 224–228; Pomeroy 2008: 95–99; Wieber 2008: 149–153; Shahabudin 2010). This is the case with all the epic films discussed in this chapter, whether they rely on ancient works or stem from

modern literary treatments of antiquity. Their departures from the source text are symptomatic of Hollywood's approach to cinematic resurrections of the classical past as a mass-appeal commodity that promises to deliver to audiences high-quality spectacle based on thoroughly researched material, but in reality conforms to the industrial rules of profit.

Although runaway productions of the mid-twentieth century that draw on Greco-Roman themes, events, and figures do not provide a trustworthy gateway into the ancient world, they are not void of contemporary historical significance. Not only did they help Hollywood gain ground in its war against television. They also served as catalysts for the reinvigoration of the European, especially Italian, film industry that had lapsed into stagnation in the aftermath of the war. The triumphal parade of *Quo Vadis* at box offices across the globe encouraged more American studios to move their productions to Rome. Italian directors, in turn, influenced by the transatlantic models, began to produce low-budget sword-and-sandals intended for domestic exhibition at second- and third-run outlets in urban and rural areas, respectively called *seconda visione* and *terza visione*. Titles from the first half of the decade (the period with which this chapter is concerned) include: *Spartaco* (*Il Gladiatore della Tracia*) (1952, dir. Riccardo Freda), *Frine, Cortigiana d'Oriente* (1953, dir. Mario Bonnard; on which see Cavallini 2008: 214–217), and *La Cortigiana di Babilonia* (1955, dir. Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia) (Casadio 2007: 29, 30, 142; for further titles, including *Messalina* [1951] directed by Carmine Gallone, see Wyke 2002: 364). Cinecittà became Europe's leading center of cinematic production, casting aside its reputation as the cinematic fortress of Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini and earning the sobriquet "Hollywood on the Tiber" used prophetically by *Time Magazine* as the title of an article published on June 26, 1950 (Morey 2008: 52, n.4).

Helen of Troy is not the only runaway production of this period based on the *Iliad*. When Warner Bros. announced its plan to produce a spectacular with either its contract player Virginia Mayo or the epitome of glamour, Hedy Lamarr, in the role of classical antiquity's most notorious femme fatale, a war broke among studios and directors as to who would be the first to bring the ancient epic to the silver screen. DeMille reportedly had a script in work that depicted Homer's heroine as "strongly allegorical" and had negotiated the financing of his new venture with Paramount, with which he produced all his pictures. However, as an article in *Variety* of May 22, 1952 reports (Nikoloutsos 2015: 76), the famous director decided to withdraw from the race for Helen to focus on the remaking of the biblical epic *The Ten Commandments* (released in 1956).

The competition with one of Hollywood's majors did not discourage independent producer Victor Pahlen from moving ahead with the preparation of

his own version of Greek myth's most lethal siren. According to an article published in *The Hollywood Reporter* on April 17, 1953, Pahlen summoned the press and announced that he had secured Lamarr (who starred as the titular seductress in DeMilles' *Samson and Delilah*) as the lead in a picture scheduled to enter production in Rome on May 15. Intended both for cinemas and as a pilot for a television series (Krohn 2009: 182), the film, in its present truncated form, casts the Hollywood queen as a performer in a traveling theater troupe who incarnates, on successive nights, three iconic royal women in love drawn from the spheres of myth/folklore and history: Genevieve de Brabant, Empress Josephine, and Helen of Troy. What happened with the project after the episodic completion of principal photography is another "big fish eat little fish" story. The film was never released theatrically in the United States. Warner Bros. purchased the distribution rights to prevent it from reaching the big screen before its own mega-picture. The Helen segment was briefly shown in Italy under the title *L'Amante di Paride* (The Lover of Paris) and in the UK as *The Face that Launched a Thousand Ships*, a title borrowed from a famous line from Christopher Marlowe's 1604 play *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (Lamarr 1966: 218–220; Barton 2010: 189–192; Shearer 2010: 275–280; Nikoloutsos 2015: 74–81; 2016: 192–194). In addition to offering testimony to the dynamics and practices of an oligopoly-based industry, this picture is also notable for being the first of the postwar era designed as a "vehicle" for a Hollywood celebrity, reviving a trend seen before in the casting of Theda Bara and Claudette Colbert as Cleopatra in 1917 and 1934 respectively.

Homer's other epic, the *Odyssey*, inspired a screen adaptation directed by Mario Camerini under the title *Ulisse*. It was the highest grossing release in Italy for 1954 (Paul 2013: 139) and featured a mixed cast of American and local actors: Kirk Douglas as the eponymous hero; Silvana Mangano as both his loyal wife Penelope and the enchanting sorceress Circe; Anthony Quinn as Antinous, the leader of Penelope's suitors; and Rossana Podestà (who starred in *Helen of Troy* a year later) as Nausicaa, the daughter of Alcinous, king of the island of the Phaeacians. The film was produced by Carlo Ponti and Dino De Laurentiis, the duo behind many critical and commercial successes of the Italian cinema in the post-war period, in collaboration with Paramount, which distributed a dubbed version to US theaters under the Anglicized title *Ulysses* in 1955. To reestablish its presence in the Italian market in the post-Fascist era, the studio opened a base in Rome and formed a partnership with the company of Ponti and De Laurentiis, agreeing to invest frozen lire from ticket revenues in their ventures. *Il brigante Musolino* ("The Brigand Musolino"), released in 1950, was "the first film made in Italy with American money," as Ponti proudly proclaimed (Small 2009: 44).

Several other titles followed in ensuing years, including *Mambo* (1954) directed by Robert Rossen who moved to Europe to repair his finances after he was blacklisted back home as a result of his original refusal to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951. *Alexander the Great* must be understood in the same context of self-imposed exile.

Importing pictures coproduced overseas was another way for Hollywood studios to increase their box-office profits. The redefinition of the relation between the majors and the exhibitors in the aftermath of the Paramount Decree of 1948 facilitated, almost necessitated, the transatlantic voyage of foreign films and created the socioeconomic conditions for their circulation into the American market. Promoted as "Art House" creations, they offered an exotic alternative to the mainstream domestic product, whose adherence to the regulations of the Production Code kept the narrative morally harmless and sanitized (Guback 1985: 477). Back in Italy, the involvement of American studios, directors, and actors in local productions was understood as a sign of cultural hegemony and power asymmetry equal to that between David and Goliath. Americans were thought to enjoy "the ease of living in a colony as if they were the bosses, and with greater freedom than in the controlled, moralist and McCarthyist Hollywood of the era" (Fisher 2011: 38). Despite this discursive negativity, in reality the Italians needed the Americans as much as the Americans needed the Italians. Italian film-makers learned their trade on the lavish sets of the epic pictures made by the giants of the US film industry, and box-office success generated a desire for emulation of popular patterns. In this respect, *Ulisse* set the trend of hiring an American star in films set in antiquity, next seen in the 1958 *Le Fatiche di Ercole* (US release title: *Hercules*), starring Steve Reeves, a film that ignited the lucrative *filone* (thread, stream) of peplum films.

Conclusion

Spectaculars anchored in antiquity represent a good percentage of Hollywood's output in the 1950s (see the year-per-year release tables in Eldridge 2006: 12–13) and became a trademark of the industry, as is portrayed in *Hail Caesar!*, the most recent venture of the Coen brothers (2016). Epic films of this period display some common characteristics.

First, they perceive accuracy not as fidelity to surviving sources but paradoxically as an attempt to surpass the visual opulence and grandeur of previous cinematic recreations of antiquity. This attitude is attested in the comment that Gore Vidal, one of the two primary yet uncredited scriptwriters of the 1959 remake of *Ben-Hur*, made about the film's director: "William Wyler

studied not Roman history but other Roman movies in preparation for *Ben-Hur*" (Vidal 1992: 84). Second, regardless of how accurately they recreate the classical world by academic standards, and despite their many conscious anachronisms, they all demonstrate a strong sense of actuality by situating even their fictive characters in a past time projected on the big screen as historical and believable. In the words of one critic: "Hollywood's ancient world is a temporal space in which mythology and history converge, unite, and interweave" (Llewellyn-Jones 2009: 569). This is the case with epic films like *Helen of Troy*, whose characters are drawn from the sphere of poetic imagination. Its promotional trailer advertises Homer's heroine as a lethal woman whose "name was *burned* into the pages of history."

Third, this relationship with history is reinforced by means of a spoken prologue (sometimes visually enhanced with a map) and/or epilogue. The historical basis of *Quo Vadis*, for example, is established in its opening scene by a voice-over who announces, through a synecdoche, the film's theme as the "immortal conflict" between the "humble cross" of the early Christians and the "proud eagles that top the victorious Roman standards." Fourth, the emphasis on the historicity of the cinematic image allows for comparisons between antiquity and modernity, and invites an analysis of the past through the lens of the present. For, although the American landscape is absent from the epics discussed in this chapter, US politics is not. For instance, *Alexander the Great* serves as a parable of contemporary Cold War geostrategic conflicts, with the united Greek city-states representing the member nations of the NATO alliance and the dynastic Persian Empire cast as an analogue for the Soviet Union.

Fifth, the plot of the spectaculars released in this period reproduces a number of longstanding stereotypical dichotomies. *Quo Vadis* and *The Robe*, for example, portray the Romans as depraved oppressors and the Christians as a virtuous oppressed minority. A similar reductive view of classical antiquity informs the narrative of *Helen of Troy* and *Alexander the Great*, in which the polarity between East and West takes on ethical and political connotations. Sixth, ancient Rome proved to be more popular at the box office and among film-makers than ancient Greece. A number of reasons can account for this preference. Rome with its arenas and gladiatorial shows provided greater opportunities for the production of grand-scale spectacle and for identification with United States, the modern superpower, which like Rome is a multicultural society and encompasses many traditions and religions. Greece, by contrast, is visually austere, with most of its iconic buildings nowadays ruined or perennially lost and therefore difficult to reproduce on screen. It was never an empire and was fragmented into many city-states that were often at war with one another (see further Galinsky 2007: 402–407; Berti and García Morcillo 2008b: 9–17; Nisbet 2008: 36–44; Paul 2010: 142–143; Blanshard

and Shahabudin 2011: 36–40). In addition, Greek history was divided into different periods, each of which had its own distinct aesthetic characteristics in terms of architecture, art and clothing. This creates an additional financial problem. Whereas for *Demetrius and the Gladiators* Fox borrowed sets and costumes from its prequel, this could have never been the case with films like *Helen of Troy* and *Alexander the Great* that are set in different epochs.

An important parameter for Rome's greater cinematic appeal is the existence of ready-made texts. *Quo Vadis* and *The Robe* were based on pre-sold properties that came with proselytized audiences. The next two Hollywood pictures set in antiquity made use of this successful recipe. *Ben-Hur* (1959, dir. William Wyler) and *Spartacus* (1960, dir. Stanley Kubrick) were both adapted from modern novels and were released to critical and commercial success. With the exception of *The 300 Spartans* (1962, dir. Rudolph Maté), all other Hollywood films produced until 1964, when the epic genre went into decline, treated Roman themes. Greek antiquity served as a source of inspiration for the numerous peplum films made in Italy during the same period.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Research for this paper was made possible through the Michael J. Morris Grant from Saint Joseph's University. I wish to thank Mary K. Huelsbeck, Assistant Director at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, for her tremendous help in navigating through archives and illustrations.

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FURTHER READING

Solomon's survey of epics set in antiquity (2001, revised and expanded edition) remains seminal. Readers who wish to obtain a more detailed picture of the economics of the film industry after 1945 may consult the following

representative works cited in the chapter: Balio (1985, essays 16–20), Hall and Neale (2010: 135–158), and Stubbs (2013: 85–108). Cyrino (2005: 7–58) contains a superb analysis of the ancient and modern background to *Quo Vadis* and *The Robe*, and discusses details of their making followed by a useful overview of basic themes and ideas pursued in each picture. Wyke (1997, especially 24–33) is a pioneering study that provides important insights into the aesthetics of postwar spectaculars and their approach to historical accuracy. Fitzgerald (2001) and Winkler (2001) offer stimulating readings of the commonalities between Roman and American history and politics in Hollywood epics of the 1950s.

There are several perceptive studies of individual productions, most of which are cited in the chapter. To recap: for *Quo Vadis*, see Wyke (1997: 110–146) and Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011: 36–57); for *The Robe*, see Smith (2007); for *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, including the Italian film *Messalina*, see Wyke (2002: 363–380); for *Ulisse*, see Burke (2005) and Paul (2013); for *L'Amante di Paride* and *Helen of Troy*, see Nikoloutsos (2015: 74–81); for *Helen of Troy*, see Winkler (2009: 210–233); Vivante (2013: 21–38); and Nikoloutsos (2015: 81–87); for *Alexander the Great*, see Nikoloutsos 2008: 224–228; Pomeroy 2008: 95–99; and Shahabudin 2010.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hollywood Ascendant: *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*

Fiona Radford

In seven of the years between 1950 and 1963, ancient world epics secured the top spot for US box office returns (Richards 2008: 55). It is no surprise then that the 1950s in Hollywood is remembered as a "golden age" for epics as well as being the decade that witnessed the birth of the blockbuster—a window of time between the strictures of the Second World War and before the financial difficulties of 1960s epics like *Cleopatra* (1963, dir. Mankiewicz) and *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964, dir. Mann). According to the American Film Institute, two films from this period—*Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*—rank second and fifth in the "Top Ten Epics" of all time. These films merit academic attention, not only for their box office success, but also for the political context of their production. Mid-twentieth century Americans were adjusting to life after the Second World War but were also dealing with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings and the blacklist. It is of great interest for us to consider the influence that this era had on these films; however, it is also crucial that we do not read too much into them. Both of these films had long and complicated production histories that will be shown to have equal import in their shaping.

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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I See Red: The Political Context

The Red Scare that arose in the late 1940s and 1950s was not the first brush with anti-Communist hysteria that America had experienced—consider the infamous Palmer raids that had taken place after the First World War (Giglio 2005; Gladchuk 2007). In the mid-1930s, Texas Congressman Martin Dies established a congressional committee with the objective of uncovering the extent of the Communist Party in the United States. Hollywood had attracted his attention by 1939, but neither he, nor his successor, Jack Tenney, found anything to report.[1] Communist sympathies became more problematic with the end of the war and the rise of tensions with the Soviets. Americans were encouraged to associate "Communist" with "un-American" (Ceplair and Englund 1980; Ahl 2007). Hollywood was again targeted by HUAC, now headed by Dies' protégé J. Parnell Thomas, in 1947, with far more devastating effect. Hollywood was the perfect place to begin as it was guaranteed to capture the attention of the nation (Ceplair and Englund 1980).

Thomas conducted some closed hearings in May, 1947, at the conclusion of which he proclaimed that "hundreds" of people in the film industry were Communists (Casty 2009). Only forty-three subpoenas were actually issued in September and only eleven of the subpoenaed would eventually appear during this first round. Bertolt Brecht quickly departed for Europe after announcing that he was not a Communist—leaving the men who would be the first "unfriendly" witnesses, the so-called "The Hollywood Ten."[2] One of the most prominent members of the Ten was Dalton Trumbo, the (eventual) screenwriter of *Spartacus.* Ostensibly HUAC was concerned that Communists had infiltrated the film industry and were sneaking their propaganda into films—a difficult claim to sustain given the structure of the studio system. As "unfriendly" witnesses tried to point out to the Committee, no one person had complete control over content (Cook 1977).

It is well-established that the members of the Hollywood Ten were not selected at random; these were people who had connections with unions and were known for "progressive" thought (Palmer 2005). Trumbo, for instance, had been involved with the 1938 Kean County agricultural strike, the Zoot Suit Riots in 1943, and supported the establishment of the American Authors' Authority, which would have been a form of collectivized labor for writers (Ceplair and Englund 1980; Palmer 2005). In an anti-HUAC pamphlet that Trumbo (1972: 37) wrote at the time, he described this as "a period when Communists, real or alleged or only suspected, are being prosecuted everywhere for their thoughts and speech and never for their acts …" The aim of many of the Hollywood members like Trumbo was more about self-interested

unionization and trying to improve the representation of disadvantaged groups in films. In 1943, for example, Trumbo gave a speech to the Writer's Congress against the damaging racial stereotypes in film and theatre.

HUAC would cite the Ten for contempt after they declined to answer such questions as: "Are you a member of the Screen Writers Guild (SWG)?" and "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?" (Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011). They could have pleaded the Fifth Amendment (the right not to incriminate themselves) in response to such questions, but the Ten decided against this. Although it would have shielded them from receiving citations for contempt, the Fifth Amendment implied that they had committed a crime and would have prevented them from speaking at all. Instead they used the First Amendment (the right to freedom of religion, free press, free speech, and so on). No one had been sent to prison for contempt since the 1920s, so the Ten were not expecting this to be the result of their case. They were optimistic that they would win their case at the Supreme Court level and that the hearings would be declared unconstitutional, but the Court refused to hear their case (Freedland 2007; Gladchuck 2007). This allowed the hearings to resume in 1951 (Smith 1989). As for Trumbo, he would serve ten months in prison in 1950. The establishment of a blacklist in the film industry is what had the largest impact on the people involved and the productions of the following decade—including *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus.*

The blacklist was established by the Waldorf Agreement (named after the hotel where the meeting took place) of November 26, 1947, which was drafted by producers and executives. This stipulated that the studios would suspend (or not hire) any of the Hollywood Ten until they had testified under oath that they were not a Communist. Furthermore, the MPAA would not hire any Communists in the future—unless they repented and cooperated with HUAC by naming names. It is unclear why the producers chose this moment to relent in the face of external pressures, when previously they had stood firm. As Casty (2009: 116–117) points out: "Whether in principle, in anger or selfishness, or in fear, they had succumbed to the pressures of right-wing zealots. For all their own motives—individual and collective, principled and invidious—the producers to all intents and purposes created the blacklist." The unions also followed this line (Ceplair and Englund 1980; Buhle and Wagner 2002).

Epic Profits: The Commercial Context

In addition to labor disputes in the early 1940s and the HUAC hearings, Hollywood was facing other threats.[3] The studio system, which had been in operation from the 1920s, was starting to weaken its hold on Hollywood. By

1947, the studio executives were dealing with the challenge to the studio trusts (which they would lose in 1948, when the US Supreme Court would order the studios to sell their theatre chains, putting an end to studios' control over exhibition and production–distribution). The 1950s were, in a sense, the beginning of the end. Many of the "movie moguls" who had run the studios up to this point were reaching the end of their careers (Finler 2003). New opportunities arose as the contract system was phased out. Some stars began to direct or set up their own production companies—including Kirk Douglas, the future star and executive producer of *Spartacus* (Maltby and Craven 1995).

The challenges did not end there. After the success of DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949), the epic was one of the weapons that Hollywood employed in the early 1950s to try to offset the threat of international distribution and to entice audiences out of the sprawling suburbs, away from an increased array of leisure activities (as well as the dreaded television) and back into the cinema (Maltby and Craven 1995; King 2000; Pomeroy 2008; Russell 2008; Hall and Neale 2010). Between 1946 and 1960, ticket sales in the USA had dropped from 4.4 to 2.129 billion, and the decrease was even more dramatic in Britain (Hall and Neale 2010: 177).

Studios hoped that wider use of existing attractions such as color and new technologies (particularly the plethora of widescreen formats) would provide audiences with a reason to return to the cinema. The weighty and important themes of epics seemed to present the perfect opportunity for showcasing the new and spectacular (Wyke 1997; King 2000). This trend began with the simultaneous debut of Fox's CinemaScope and *The Robe* in 1953 (Wyke 1997). CinemaScope was a huge success, and other studios were quick to adopt rival processes (such as SuperScope, Technirama and Panavision, to name a few). CinemaScope itself was not perfect, sometimes causing "visual distortions," and this provided one of the impetuses that fueled the development of various widescreen processes would continue throughout the decade (Hall and Neale 2010).

One of the most successful technological developments was Todd-AO; a flexible option that shot a 35 mm regular print alongside a 70 mm widescreen, thus providing the opportunity for general release after the initial roadshow engagements in theatres with the necessary exhibition equipment (Hall and Neale 2010). As had been the case with CinemaScope, Todd-AO spurred on the studios to use similar formats, and our two epics would be the beneficiaries of these later developments. *Ben-Hur* (1959) would be filmed using MGM's short-lived Camera 65, whereas Super Technirama (or Technirama 70) was used for *Spartacus* (Hall and Neale 2010). These 70 mm processes preserved their "specialness" as they were never as widely distributed

and thus were connected with the most prestigious films (Hall and Neale 2010). This may have affected how these two epics were initially received by audiences. On the production side, however, these cameras affected the way that these films were shot. Kubrick had initially been excited about using Technirama, but he found that this camera could not easily been moved without compromising on definition (Ciment 1983). Wyler found Camera 65 similarly challenging. Wyler was well known for long takes that were shot in deep focus, and he struggled with Camera 65's narrow depth of field. He also needed to figure out how he would fill in the extra space in close ups or a two-shot in this wide format (Warner Bros. 2012).

Big Ben

With studios keen to make use of the spectacular, filmmakers were encouraged to "think big" (Späth and Tröhler 2013). As one studio executive stated: "There was a waiting market for a well-made spectacle" (*Variety*, December 2, 1959 as cited in Solomon 2013: 33). MGM had had an early "Quolossal" hit with *Quo Vadis* and in 1953 they started work on a remake of one of their smash hits from the silent era—*Ben-Hur* (Hall and Neale 2010: 137). As with so many Roman films, *Ben-Hur* (1959) was a successful novel and play before becoming a film. Judah Ben-Hur's journey began with his creator General Lew Wallace: a lawyer, veteran of the American Civil War and, from 1878-81, the Governor of New Mexico. In November, 1880, Wallace's "labor of love," *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, was published. Sales were slow at first, but 4,500 copies were selling each month by 1886 (Jones 1985: 144). This was hardly an accident. Wallace had not been inspired to write his biblical novel because of any great religious fervor, but because he wanted to write a best-seller—and few books sold better than the Bible (Gutjahr 1993).

Life magazine dubbed *Ben-Hur* one of "the most important books ever written in America" in 1959 (Theisen 1984: 38). Its importance seemingly has far more to do with its widespread appeal rather than its literary merits. *The Atlantic Monthly*, for example, pointed out the similarities between *Ben-Hur* and the dime novel, a format that, while it might incorporate moral lessons, had entertainment as its main purpose (Gutjahr 1993). In spite of its mixed reviews, *Ben-Hur* was a commercial powerhouse and was eventually translated into twenty-one languages, including Braille (Theisen 1984; Paul 2013). The novel featured exciting sequences, such as the chariot race between Judah and Messala (Solomon 2013). Due to the religious theme, the novel was also endorsed by various church organizations—including the

Vatican (Theisen 1984). The Ben-Hur name became even more widely dispersed due to its use in product names, including candy, baking powder, gasoline and the town of Benhur (Theisen 1984). This appeal translated to the stage when Wallace finally relented to the unending requests for a theatrical adaptation, attracting in excess of 20 million viewers over its twenty-year run (Theisen 1984; Winkler 2009). The play ran for three and a half hours and, through the use of a treadmill and live horses, included such spectacles as the chariot race (Theisen 1984). In fact, Mayer (1994: 193) points out that both the New York and London critics highlighted that the play's "… intellectual and dramatic content were both less effective and less significant than its spectacle, and that, as a consequence, *Ben-Hur* was deeply dependent upon the technical resources deployed in the production."

Due to the astonishing success of the novel and play, it is hardly surprising that the film industry would take an early interest in *Ben-Hur*. The cinema business has often preferred to use formulas that have a proven track record as (theoretically) the financial risk was not as great (Schatz 1996). The earliest film adaptation, a one-reeler, had been forestalled due to copyright violation, but *Ben-Hur* made its screen debut shortly after in 1907. *Ben-Hur* (1907, Sidney Olcott, Frank Oates Rose, H. Temple, Kalem Company) consisted of twelve scenes (Solomon 2001). The next screen adaptation came in 1925 and was a considerably larger undertaking, costing four million dollars—an immense sum at the time (Cyrino 2005). Although the 1925 film was hugely popular, the high cost and "an ill-advised profit-sharing deal …with the novel's publishers" meant that it took several years for it to make a profit (Cyrino 2005: 70). *Ben-Hur* (1925, dir. Niblo) certainly put MGM on the map, and once again, the chariot race was a central attraction.

Ben-Hur (1959), along with *Titanic* (1997, dir. Cameron) and *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* (2003, dir. Jackson), still holds the record for the most Oscar wins ever. It is difficult to believe that this critical and commercial smash hit might not have made it to the screen, but such was the case. The commercial situation and the lengthy, complicated production of the film shaped the final product. For MGM, the late 1940s and early 1950s were particularly turbulent due to tensions and high turnover amongst the studio executive. Cash flow was also a huge problem in 1953. As T. Gene Hatcher explained in the DVD Commentary for *Ben-Hur*, the studio had eighty million dollars invested in unreleased regular (35 mm) film projects that were put on hold while MGM waited to gauge audience reaction to *The Robe* and its CinemaScope format. The favorable response encouraged further use of the spectacular and epic storylines to go along with it. MGM had early success with *Quo Vadis?* (1951) and in 1953 the producer of this

film, Sam Zimbalist, suggested that MGM start work on a remake of one of their smash hits from the silent era—*Ben-Hur* (Hall and Neale 2010: 137).

Karl Tunberg, an experienced studio contract writer, was the first screenwriter to work on the project, submitting complete script drafts from April, 1954 until June, 1955—the only person to complete an entire draft (Warner Bros. 2012). At this time, Zimbalist also secured veteran director-producer Sidney Franklin, who not only had previous experience directing an MGM epic (*The Good Earth*, 1937, dir. Franklin) but had a reputation for making big projects happen. The troubles at MGM, however, proved to be more influential than Franklin. The project was not cancelled, but Zimbalist had to wait until the accession of Joseph R. Vogel before he was really given the green light in early 1957. Studio finances were still precarious; the fate of MGM rested on the success of *Ben-Hur* (Warner Bros. 2012). In order to save the studio money, as well as to enable MGM to make use of frozen international funds, Zimbalist planned to shoot the epic in Italy.

Zimbalist pulled together many of the talented crew members that he had worked with on *Quo Vadis?*—art directors Edward Carfagno and William A. Horning, cinematographer Robert Surtees, and composer Miklós Rózsa. In late 1957, Franklin decided that he was not well enough to direct. Zimbalist managed to talk the eminent William Wyler into directing the epic. Wyler was an unexpected choice as he was renowned for his slow pace and for multiple takes—so much so that MGM even requested an efficiency report from his most recent employer (Paramount). Zimbalist knew that Wyler would be able to bring a sense of intimacy to this epic and to draw out the characters. The spectacular element could be handled by the second-unit director (as was often the case). For his part, Wyler was keen to take on an unfamiliar genre.

Wyler was not, however, entirely satisfied with Tunberg's script. Between January and April, 1958, Wyler's brother Robert prepared his critique for the new director, although none of his suggestions ended up having a major impact on the final film (Warner Bros. 2012). Zimbalist solicited Maxwell Anderson and S. N. Behrman to work on the script (and it seems that Tunberg himself was still submitting partial drafts up until April 18, 1958). These writers had mostly focused on reworking Tunberg's occasionally ponderous dialogue, rather than major changes to the narrative—although each would leave his mark. Wyler and Zimbalist departed for Rome in April, 1958, accompanied by one of MGM's contract writers—Gore Vidal. Wyler knew he would need a writer to continue working on the script in Rome. Vidal did not agree to remain for the entire shoot, so Zimbalist also employed a playwright with limited experience in films—Christopher Fry. Fry would remain in Rome until January, 1959 when the shoot finally drew to a close.

Wyler, Fry and Vidal (while he was around) would rewrite the script in any spare moments, including their one day off each week, attempting to stay ahead of the shooting schedule. Wyler also solicited the input of a historical advisor, Professor Moshe Gottstein, whose suggestions were incorporated on occasion (Warner Bros. 2012).

Many script pages survive from this particularly hectic period of rewrites, but without a clear author. Herein lies one of the major problems in deciphering the potential motivations within *Ben-Hur*: we cannot be sure of authorship. This was an issue even at the time, as there was a bitter dispute over who should receive screen credit for the film. The SWG settled on sole credit for Karl Tunberg, as he could prove that he had written the one-third of a script that was required for credit, but Wyler and star Charlton Heston voiced outrage at this decision. In 1976, Vidal insisted that Fry had been instructed to start his rewrites from the end of the film while he worked from the start, with the aim that they would meet around the chariot race (Vidal, as cited in Warner Bros. 2012). Most infamous was Vidal's claim that he inserted a subtle homoerotic element to the scenes between Messala and Judah—a claim that was always vigorously and publicly denied by Heston (and Wyler).

Gaut (1997) has suggested that we acknowledge the fact that films have multiple authors, ranging from actors to cinematographers. More recently, Solomon (2013) has pointed out that in the case of epics like *Ben-Hur*, the potential meanings of such films multiply as more changes are made. After considering this complex production, is it truly possible to unravel this tangled screenplay and assess the intention of those behind it? As was often the case with nineteenth-century toga plays, films about Rome were frequently read as a comment on the fate of empire (Mayer 1994). While audiences are invited to side with the oppressed peoples (whether they be Christian, slaves or, in this case, the Jewish nation), there may also be uncomfortable recognition of parallels with the Romans. In the case of *Ben-Hur*, Solomon (2013) has pointed out the acquisition of new territory (from natives and colonies) during the time that Wallace was writing the novel—and this building of nations and empires was occurring when the play debuted. The 1959 film was, by contrast, released during the era of decolonization and the beginning of post-colonial histories. Various academics (McAlister 2001; Cyrino 2005; Richards 2008) have suggested that, through the harmonious relationship of Judah and the Sheik, *Ben-Hur* might have been making an optimistic statement about the possible unity of peoples in the Middle East against dominating foreign powers in the wake of the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis. Cyrino (2005) reads *Ben-Hur* as a Cold War allegory (like *Quo Vadis?* and *The Robe*), in which the Romans represent a totalitarian regime intent on oppressing the

freedom-fighting Jews (and Arabs). Indeed, in a memo Wyler specifically cited the theme of "freedom vs tyranny" as his main motivation for taking on an epic (Memo from William Wyler March 30, 1960—"Why *Ben-Hur*?" to MGM's French press office, cited in Russell 2008). Winkler (as cited in Cyrino 2005: 84) has seen a more direct allusion to Nazi Germany in Messala's reference to the potential "extinction" of the Jews.

If we consider Messala's demands that Judah "name names" and Tiberius's statement that he has received information about Judah prior to his introduction by Arrius, there is the additional possibility of parallels to the HUAC trials (Cyrino 2005). Solomon (2013) has suggested that the film is advocating the dominance of Christianity and democratic governments. (Indeed, Solomon suggests that the film may owe some of its success to the depiction of the ancient beginnings of these two elements of modern Western society). Given his involvement as director and screenwriter, much could be made of Wyler's statements about the parallels between the Jews in *Ben-Hur* and the contemporary situation in Israel—the former fighting the Romans for their freedom and the latter fighting the Arabs. In an interview, Wyler stated that he intended his film to have more of a Zionist message (Interview of William Wyler by Ronald Davies, cited in Russell 2008). Within this multiplicity of possible interpretations may lie one of the keys to *Ben-Hur*'s success. Just as in the days of the toga plays, the Christianity was often kept conveniently vague, Hollywood tended to keep the politics ambiguous—thus attracting the widest possible audience (Mayer 1994; Maltby as cited in Russell 2008). Contrasting the fates of *Ben-Hur* (1959) and the politically contentious *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004, dir. Moore), Solomon (2013) has highlighted this importance of "popular politics" for enduring success. Solomon has demonstrated that the young firebrand Judah of Wallace's novel was translated into a more mature character for the film; his more rebellious, anti-Roman comments from the January 1958 script were eventually cut. For an epic in particular, a wide audience was a must—and if we adopt the view proposed by Solomon (2013), seemingly invoking Barthes (1967), there is no guarantee that an audience will interpret a film in the way that was intended; each audience member will no doubt take away something different. Both Zimbalist and Wyler made it quite clear that one of their main motivations was to make money—and lots of it.

Playing Fast and Loose with Spartacus

As much as it pains me to say it, *Spartacus* will always be the poorer cousin of *Ben-Hur*—the bridesmaid and never the bride. This is true in terms of critical acclaim, awards, and financial gains; indeed, it owes its very existence

to *Ben-Hur*. Kirk Douglas was turned on to the story as he sulked after losing the role of Judah to Heston. Nonetheless, *Spartacus* certainly has not lagged behind in terms of academic attention, including the very useful 2007 collection of essays edited by Martin Winkler. My own research regarding *Spartacus* is based on the archival evidence in the Dalton Trumbo Papers in the Special Collections at UCLA [henceforth DT UCLA], the Special Collections of the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles [MH], the Kirk Douglas and Dalton Trumbo Papers at the Wisconsin Centre for Film and Theatre Research [KD and DT], the Howard Fast Papers at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia [HF], and the Stanley Kubrick Archive at the University of the Arts, London [SK].[4]

Just like *Ben-Hur*, there is a plenitude of interpretations for *Spartacus*. As Späth and Tröhler (2013: 57) pithily state: "…Kubrick's *Spartacus* echoes those of the McCarthy era, the civil rights movement [in Spartacus's relations with the Nubian gladiator, Draba], feminism, and homosexuality, while he also conveys the bourgeois, middle class values of the nuclear family, muscular manhood, cool restraint, and intelligence." Paul (2013: 212) proposes that films like *Spartacus* assist society in unearthing the qualities that it "wants or needs from its heroes." A popular interpretation positions Spartacus as a Christ-like or Moses-like figure in the final film; the hero of a Zionist tale—a gentle, wise leader who tries to free his people from their oppressive overlords and lead them to their homeland (Cyrino 2005; Winkler 2007; Paz 2007; Malamud 2009; Paul 2013). Indeed, one audience member at the preview screening noted on their opinion card: "Can't you leave Jesus Christ out of one history picture?"[5] Douglas toyed with the idea of tying the release of *Spartacus* (1960) in with the Centennial of the Civil War by underlining that *Spartacus*'s message of freedom would eventually thrive in America.[6] The involvement of prominent Communist Party members, such as Howard Fast and Dalton Trumbo, have lent legitimacy to interpretations of this film in connection to the HUAC hearings. The information in the archives leads me to suggest, along with Paul (2013: 209): "It is understandable that such interpretations should arise, especially since the Communist affiliations of both Trumbo and Fast are well-known; but still, we should take care not to read too much into it."

Spartacus was destined to be an especially troubled production, which makes this movie a particularly fruitful case study for considering the construction of history on film (and especially the process in which history is constructed by multiple authors). The range of people that affected the construction of this history include: Kirk Douglas ("Spartacus" and executive producer), Edward Lewis (producer), Saul Bass (Design consultant), Tony Curtis ("Antoninus"), Howard Fast (author and screenwriter), Robert

Harris (1991 reconstruction and restoration), Arthur Koestler (author of *The Gladiators*), Stanley Kubrick (director, 1959–60), Charles Laughton ("Gracchus"), Laurence Olivier ("Crassus"), Peter Ustinov ("Batiatus" and screenwriter), Anthony Mann (director, 1958–59), Vittorio Nino Novarese (historical and technical adviser), Jean Simmons ("Varinia"), Edward Muhl (Head of Universal International Pictures—henceforth UP), Lew Wasserman (Douglas's agent and the head of MCA) and Dalton Trumbo (screenwriter). This list could even be expanded. Duncan Cooper has provided excellent articles on Trumbo and the role of the studio, and a detailed consideration of Kubrick's role can be found in Zemon Davis (2002) and *Stanley Kubrick: New Perspectives* (2015). In 2012, Kirk Douglas published a new memoir, which is a valuable resource, but is clearly heavily based on the materials that remain in his private archives. Douglas (2012: 167) openly admits how difficult it was to write about the film when over fifty years had passed: "You are amazed at how much you've forgotten and fascinated when you read the research and discover the thousands of details that go into the making of a motion picture." In this article I propose to focus primarily on the previously underestimated role of the three British actors (Olivier, Laughton and Ustinov).

The Birth of Spartacus

The wife of Douglas's producer, Edward Lewis, had seen filmic potential in the novel *Spartacus* by Howard Fast, a successful author and prominent member of the Left. Unlike *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus* was a recent publication; however, Spartacus had a much longer history. From his rebellious Roman Republican origins, Spartacus emerged in the eighteenth century as a symbol for the fight for freedom in a variety of contexts. Most pertinent for *Spartacus* (1960) was his use as a figurehead for the *Spartakusbund*—a group of radical German Social Democrats who eventually led an (unsuccessful) uprising against the German government that was suppressed in 1919. Howard Fast had started reading about the *Spartakusbund* while he was in prison for contempt of Congress after refusing to reveal the names of people who had donated to the Spanish Refugee Appeal. Although Fast toyed with the idea of writing about this movement, he decided that it was too soon and turned his focus to the man they had chosen to represent them: Spartacus. Fast wrote this novel upon his release and, due to his blacklisted status, he had to self-publish it. The gamble paid off.

Fast crafted a story in which the Roman [read: capitalist] world is civilized on the surface, but underneath the lives of the Romans are unnatural and perverted (Futrell 2001; Malamud 2007). The slave community (post-breakout) is, on the other hand, quite idealized—an almost proto-Communist

state (Futrell 2001). Unlike *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus* was not written in an ideal format for the screen—even Ed Muhl was concerned about its potential (Douglas 2012). It was written in flashback after the revolt was over and, therefore, when many of the slave characters (Spartacus included) were dead (Macdonald 1996; Trow 2006). Douglas (2012) also thought that Spartacus was too "Christ-like"—there was no progression ("The Year of *Spartacus*"). Just as Blanshard has suggested that some ancient historians are more easily translated to the screen than others (Herodotus and Plutarch versus Thucydides and Livy), I would propose that Wallace's *Ben-Hur* was made for the movies in a way that Fast's *Spartacus* was not. This is not to suggest that no changes were made to Wallace's novel during the adaptation process; that is clearly not true. Nor is this to suggest that Fast's novel could not be successfully adapted; only that the format and style of writing were not as easy to adapt as Wallace's work. As *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther (1959) noted, Wyler never overlooked "… the tempting opportunities for thundering scenes of massive movement and mob excitement that are abundantly contained in the … novel…" Douglas was, nonetheless, enthusiastic about the possibilities of Fast's novel and he was keen to secure *Spartacus* for his new production company (Bryna Productions).

While trying to secure funding, Douglas discovered that United Artists (UA) was already financing a Spartacus film for Yul Brynner that was based on Arthur Koestler's novel, *The Gladiators* (1939). A race between the two projects ensued. Although Douglas emerged victorious, this early competition would leave an indelible mark on the completed film. Fast had originally demanded to write the script, but Douglas and Lewis were not impressed with his initial efforts. They could not afford to be patient as they not only had competition from UA, but a potential backer was demanding to see a draft in four weeks—and so they had secretly employed the blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo (Lewis 1960). Trumbo was not only talented: he also had a reputation for speed. There was no love lost between fellow blacklistees Fast and Trumbo, a fact well known to Douglas and Lewis. Even if Trumbo had not been blacklisted, they would have preferred that Fast be kept in the dark about his employment.[7] Fast was incensed when he was finally officially removed from his post, which perhaps explains the vitriol that he would direct at Douglas and Lewis (Lewis 1960; Douglas 2012). Part of Douglas's strategy to beat UA was to secure the eminent British actors Laurence Olivier, Charles Laughton and Peter Ustinov to play the Roman roles (Crassus, Gracchus and Batiatus) before Brynner. This was a coup, but brought a new set of problems. All three had directorial experience and were not shy about professing their opinions. Indeed, the various demands that all three actors made about improving the script [read: their

parts] before they would sign on turned out to be a good indication of the working relationship that lay ahead. Nonetheless, Douglas (2012) was determined to secure these stars, and so he ordered his screenwriter to work on the Roman sections of the script over the slave parts.

After seeing the script and the cast that Bryna had managed to secure, UP agreed to finance *Spartacus*—estimating a cost of around four million dollars (Lewis 1960). Douglas (2012) knew that Brynner was unable to start shooting in Europe (as he had planned) until the weather improved, and so he began shooting his film immediately in California. UA's parade had been rained on by Douglas one too many times and Brynner's project was canned. Douglas's (2012) haste meant that the script for his own project was not finalized when filming began. This situation, particularly in the case of a film in which the screenwriter's identity had to be kept secret and he could never be present on the set, provided potentially greater opportunities for input into the script than might have otherwise been the case. There were plenty of egos willing to take advantage. As Lewis commented in the DVD commentary: "The curse of the picture for the first director was that there were five directors on the movie."

The studio seems to have insisted that Douglas and Lewis hire Anthony Mann, an established director, for the project. Mann is a shadowy figure in this production. It is clear that he had some input while he was involved, but it is virtually impossible to say what that input was.[8] After only two weeks of filming, Mann would leave the production in equally shadowy and mysterious circumstances. There are various reasons that have been given by the cast and crew for his hasty exit, but the most likely seems to have been some sort of creative disagreement with Douglas. He was quickly replaced by a young, relatively inexperienced director with whom Douglas had recently filmed a low-budget, critically acclaimed war film (*Paths of Glory* 1957). Enter Stanley Kubrick.

Kubrick was an unusual choice for this million-dollar epic. He was self-taught (as opposed to being a graduate of the studio system) and had been directing (and writing and lighting and …) low-budget films that had been gaining some critical attention—but he was far from a household name and had yet to make any money from directing (Gelmis 1974; Lobrutto 1999). Inexperience did not mean that he was timid; Kubrick is well-known for being a strong personality, for the control that he liked to exert over his pictures and for being a trying person to work with (Falsetto 1996; Baxter 1997; Lobrutto 1999). Although he was a newcomer, due to the nature of his early films, he had enjoyed independence and control up to this point. It is hard to know what he expected of *Spartacus*, but he was jumping on board a project that was already in motion. *Spartacus* was, after all, a phenomenal

opportunity for Kubrick to establish himself (as noted in the DVD commentary of Saul Bass and Peter Ustinov) and it certainly played a part in his later success.

Like Wyler, regardless of deadlines and rising budgets, Kubrick shot the film his way most of the time. He also put forward his own contributions to the unfinished screenplay. Kubrick's oeuvre encompasses a variety of genres, but his work definitely tends to gravitate towards the darker side of human nature and life (Lobrutto 1999), so the Fast–Trumbo heroic Spartacus was problematic. The significant clash between the authors of this film has often been interpreted on the basis of the report that Trumbo wrote in August, 1959 after seeing Kubrick's rough cut. Trumbo identified two competing ideologies: the Large and Small Spartacus. In short, the Large Spartacus was a great leader and commander who genuinely cared for his followers, the equal (if not superior) to the Romans; he would lead a revolt that shook the Republic to its core. The Small Spartacus has power thrust upon him, he is a reluctant leader who cares primarily about the freedom of himself and his love (Varinia), he often questions their goals; the revolt is a blip on the Republic's radar. Kubrick is often portrayed as the champion of the Small Spartacus, a concept which is more in keeping with Koestler's (1939: 317) treatment of the revolt in *The Gladiators* ("the story of another revolution that had gone wrong"). While Kubrick certainly consulted Koestler, it is too simplistic to say that all of his ideas came from this source. Kubrick claimed that he consulted Plutarch and Sallust, and Trumbo appears to have lent Kubrick his research notes.[9] A close reading of the production notes demonstrates that while some of Kubrick's ideas were sometimes too Koestlerian and Small to fit with the original vision (such as the conflict between Spartacus and Crixus over raiding), others were just right—Large, in other words—such as a series of scenes between Tigranes and Spartacus.

Yet Kubrick was hardly the only one to try and impose his own ideas on the script. Trumbo could not keep track of the various rewrites that were happening on the set. New versions of scenes were sometimes arriving the morning the scene was due to be shot, and further delays could ensue if Douglas (or one of the more powerful stars) did not like the changes and a story conference had to be held. Trumbo had to fight for the original vision of the film, but also for individual lines or a word.[10] From Douglas's (2012: 118) recent account one would think that he recognized what a precarious position the film was in: "The quick change in directors and leading ladies had created an atmosphere of chaos on the set that was becoming more evident by the day. Dialogue was written, rewritten, discarded, rewritten again, then improvised." Yet the various interviews, both unpublished and published, from friends and foes, make it clear that Douglas reveled in creative

chaos, despite his recent claims that it was the hasty start that caused the problems. He seemed to thrive on the debates and was dubbed "General Mixmaster" by some of the crew.[11] This was less than ideal, especially considering the disorganized beginning. As executive producer, the responsibility ultimately lay with Douglas to regain control of the cast and crew. This he failed to do until quite late in the production, and in the meantime, Trumbo's unofficial competition increased.

Ustinov: "The Diplomat with the Dagger"

There was considerable hostility between Laughton (Gracchus) and Olivier (Crassus) well before *Spartacus.* Olivier once claimed that it began for him when Laughton did not return to Britain after the outbreak of the Second World War, but mostly it seems that these two very talented actors made each other incredibly insecure on a professional level (Higham 1976; Ustinov 1977). They had chosen different career goals (with Laughton pursuing the Hollywood dollar and Olivier aspiring to critical acclaim) and in spite of their respective successes, remained very chary of each other. Laughton reported to the *Spartacus* set expecting the worst. Ustinov (1977) (Batiatus), his confidante, records that he became convinced that Olivier was talking to Douglas on the sly, convincing him to beef up the role of Crassus at the expense of Gracchus. Laughton's paranoia only increased and he was certain that he had been tricked into playing an unimportant role, just so they could attach his name to the project. He feared that his part was going to be cut entirely.[12] Trumbo's efforts to placate Laughton were to no avail—he would only trust Ustinov to write his scenes and the two would rehearse their scenes thoroughly in the privacy of home (Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Peter Ustinov 1959 in Trumbo 1970). Even this consideration did not put Laughton at ease on the set, and there are numerous reports from crew members in their interview for "The Year of *Spartacus*" about Laughton's off-camera dramatics on set, as well as an *LA Mirror* interview with Kubrick.

The tensions between Olivier and Laughton paved the way for Ustinov's involvement in the writing process. Laughton refused to act in the scenes that had been written by Trumbo; he would only work with Ustinov (Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Peter Ustinov 1959 in Trumbo 1970).[13] Archival records indicate that Ustinov was hired in the capacity of writer on June 5, 1959. Laughton seemed oblivious to the idea that Ustinov was most likely going to write scenes that benefited his own character most of all.[14] Archival research reveals that Ustinov did not restrict himself to scenes between the two Romans—or even to scenes in which Batiatus was present. Ustinov's rewrites include a scene between Varinia and Spartacus after Draba's death,

a scene in which David and Spartacus wonder why the revolt failed following their capture, and a confrontation between Spartacus and Crassus.[15] None of this material is dated, so it is hard to determine exactly how much is purely Ustinov and how much might be Ustinov reworking Trumbo's material. There are also scenes by Ustinov that resemble parts of Fast's script—to the extent that Ustinov even quotes directly from it. In a scene between Batiatus and Crassus set before the last battle, Ustinov used dialogue from the novel itself, while also using an idea from Trumbo in which Batiatus would ask Crassus for the right to auction off any captured slaves.[16] It is unclear whether Ustinov was just taking notes from Fast or whether these scenes were meant to be final pieces of work.

Judging from Trumbo's existing writings, it certainly seems as though he and Ustinov worked closely on the script and that Trumbo incorporated Ustinov's material (Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Peter Ustinov 1959 in Trumbo 1970).[17] Although we cannot say for certain, Trumbo may have been using Ustinov's dialogue in one of the drafts of the Varinia and Crassus dining scene, the night Senate scene in which Crassus outlines his plans for Gracchus's exile, the arrest of Gracchus by Caesar, and the scene in which Crassus questions Batiatus about Spartacus (Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Peter Ustinov 1959 in Trumbo 1970; Ustinov 1997).[18] We appear to be on more solid footing with the scene between Gracchus and Batiatus following the gladiator breakout and the scene between them after Batiatus has been flogged and thrown out of Crassus's camp—these seem to be largely Ustinov's work. Most significantly, it seems that Ustinov authored the majority of Crassus's speech to Gracchus after his arrest during the night Senate scene—probably because (as Trumbo noted) the two Brits were once again hysterical about who was going to steal the spotlight.[19] Crassus memorably menaces Gracchus with the lines:

> "The *enemies of the state* are known. Arrests are in progress; the *prisons begin to fill*. In every city and province *lists of the disloyal* have been compiled [my emphasis]."

Previous studies have noted the potential connection between McCarthy and Crassus's "lists of the disloyal" (Harris 1996; Hoffman 2000; Futrell 2001; Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011). However, we must be careful in associating this scene with the blacklisted Trumbo, as it seems more likely Ustinov wrote it. Ustinov (1997) was an opponent of McCarthyism and had caused his studio (MGM) a serious headache when he decided to record a broadcast for the BBC about the alleged existence of subversion in the army.

Much as Trumbo admired Ustinov's wit, his priority was the film as a whole and his report indicates that he felt Ustinov had been given too much latitude with the characterizations of Batiatus and Gracchus. Trumbo had always intended for Gracchus to be the "sub-hero" of the film and he did not like the way that Ustinov's scenes with the slave girls had moved beyond the "fun" tone originally envisaged and turned him into a sleaze for the sake of a few laughs.[20] Trumbo was, however, far more concerned with the scene in which Gracchus and Batiatus conspired to kidnap Varinia. In support of the Large Spartacus vision, Trumbo's Gracchus was to have remarked that Spartacus had succeeded in destroying the Republic. While watching Kubrick's rough cut, Trumbo was dismayed that Ustinov had cut all such references by Gracchus during this scene and his suicide scene.[21] None of these lines were restored in the final film. The report makes it clear that Trumbo felt that Laughton was at his best in the Senate scenes that Ustinov had not tampered with. It might seem obvious that Trumbo would prefer his own work, and it is natural that Trumbo would have been ruffled by Ustinov's influence at times—after all, Ustinov had more regular and direct access to the production than a blacklisted writer ever could and Fast's involvement was also sporadic (Cooper 2007).[22] Then again, Trumbo may have had a point about other screenwriters being able to fiddle with certain scenes with little thought to the overarching narrative. In the *Report*, Trumbo recalled that Ustinov had jokingly drawn a picture of Laughton with a knife in his back during one of their meetings. In their interviews for "The Year of Spartacus," both Simmons and Curtis seem to have an awareness that Ustinov's intentions might not always have been pure. Reports from the crew and a reporter from *Life* magazine show that behind the jovial and charming demeanor was an actor who was quite capable of throwing temper tantrums (generally directed at Kubrick) when things did not go his way. Most incriminatingly, Ustinov was the only actor to walk away with an Oscar for his performance.

Fast Approaching

Although Fast had been removed from the project during the early stages, Douglas had kept him informed of their progress by sending him scripts, and Fast seems to have replied with his comments.[23] That was the extent of his involvement until someone "rediscovered" his original script and Fast's ideas apparently were in vogue again.[24] At around the same time that Ustinov was officially employed as a writer, Fast was also employed to write some new material. We can only speculate as to who was responsible for this decision. I have suggested that Kubrick was behind it as Fast seems to have

been inordinately fond of Kubrick, considering that the director was often drawing on ideas from another novel.

Fast's scenes focused mostly on the slaves, as this was the section of the film that needed improvement. Only a couple of these scenes would eventually be used: the scene in which two Roman officers are forced to fight for the amusement of the gladiators and the scene between Antoninus and Spartacus when they are chained to a wagon wheel after the war is lost. Harder to trace are the bits and pieces that may have been used from the scenes that were discarded. For instance, Fast had written quite a few scenes that involved Varinia, including a version of the breakout. Trumbo's Varinia had always been present during the revolt, but in Fast's scene she is absent and reunites with Spartacus later at the slave camp.[25] Although both versions can be found in the Revised Final Script (January 16, 1959), Fast's idea remains in the Final Shooting Script (September 14, 1959). Fast viewed his reemployment as his opportunity to erase the harm done to Spartacus's character by the "illiterate freebooter" and to inject "the greatness and grandeur of character that the man had and which I tried to write."[26] Even though both Fast and Trumbo wanted to craft a Large Spartacus, it is clear that they went about that in different ways. Fast's Spartacus was almost uniformly "messianic," while Trumbo envisioned a man who evolved into a hero (Cooper 2007: 15). Although Fast's script was rediscovered and he was back on the books, Trumbo did not welcome yet *another* voice being added to the mix: Fast's ideas were not compatible with the current concept.[27]

Trumbo's notes make it clear that he was particularly concerned about the "multiple authorship" situation, not because his political message was being lost, but because the film as a whole was becoming incoherent: "Whether *Spartacus* was a good film or bad does not matter; the real story relates not to the quality of the finished product, but to the difficulties of getting anything at all on the screen that people could understand."[28] This disturbed Trumbo, who was undeniably passionate about this project and had been hoping that this would be the smash hit film that might break the blacklist.[29] In 1947, Trumbo had enjoyed a particularly lucrative contract with MGM: $3,000 per week or $75,000 per script (his choice), the ability to choose his own projects, the liberty to take holidays at will and, most unique of all, no morality clause (Cook 1977). The blacklist denied him such professional freedoms.

The establishment of the blacklist quickly led to the rise of a black market. In the years between his release from prison and the production of *Spartacus*, Trumbo had been forced to borrow money, fight for work, and write scripts at bargain prices. Along with friend and fellow blacklistee, Michael Wilson, Trumbo became prominent on the black market; they

would take any job on offer. If they were too busy, they would pass the job on to another blacklistee. Trumbo wanted the black market to thrive as it would prove how ineffectual the blacklist was (Smith 1989; Hanson 2001). As time passed, although Trumbo's circumstances improved (he even won an Oscar—under a pseudonym), he became concerned that the surreptitious dealings of the black market were becoming institutionalized (Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Alvah Bessie May 21, 1958 in Trumbo 1970).[30] Eventually, Trumbo decided that the blacklist would "… only be broken by the sheer excellence of the works of two or three blacklisted writers"—namely, himself, Wilson and Albert Maltz (Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Michael Wilson February 25, 1959 in Trumbo 1970). If the work brought huge profits for the studios, the blacklisted writers would have enough power to demand to see their names back on the screen. *Spartacus* was part of his strategy. Although Trumbo certainly believed that the Large Spartacus would make a better film, his main concern was a producing a coherent film and he was happy to follow whichever direction the "committee of writers" (as he dubbed the various contributors) decided upon—as long as it was one direction.[31] Cynically, we might also note that, as it looked increasingly likely that Trumbo would be given screen credit, he undoubtedly wanted to oversee this direction entirely by himself so that there would be no *Ben-Hur*-like confusion over screen credit (Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Michael Wilson March 30, 1959 in Trumbo 1970). The Large (and the original) version was decided upon and would be effected by the reshoots that were ordered after Douglas backed the some of the suggestions in Trumbo's report.

Artistically Trumbo's preferred the Large Spartacus, but his main concern was to make a great film. (Trumbo had actually almost passed on *Spartacus* [Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Albert Maltz January 21, 1958 in Trumbo 1970]). Trumbo might prefer films that were in sync with his own beliefs, as *Spartacus* appeared to be, but this was not always possible—particularly during the blacklist years (John Howard Lawson cited in Ceplair and Englund 1980).[32] As Ed Lewis, who worked with Trumbo eight times, remarked in the DVD commentary: "[he never had] any deep, hidden motives that they were going to be able to subvert material and make big political statements … he wouldn't have written a film that glorified Adolf Hitler. But he wasn't looking for political content. He was looking for stories that made great movies." Trumbo was conscious that people would also be quick to spot Communist propaganda, even where none existed, because of his history.[33] Douglas (2012: 4) similarly stated: "I am not a political activist. When I produced *Spartacus* in 1959, I was trying to make the best movie I could make, not a political statement."

As Cooper (2007) has demonstrated, the domestic political situation strongly influenced the final phase of editing. With a budget that had skyrocketed to twelve million dollars, UP was taking no chances with politically risky content. The studio had the final cut and seems to have ordered that the references to slave victories (including battle maps) be excluded from the film. Undoubtedly, this decision undermined the stature of Spartacus and the revolt, but thanks to the reshoots, Large Spartacus material remains. Therefore, when Malamud (2007: 122) comments that the "disagreements over the meaning of Spartacus and the slave revolt … resulted in a deradicalized, or at best, ambiguous Spartacus," the latter is a fairer evaluation. A Medium Spartacus is the result—or as Paul (2013: 209–210) states: "outlines of left-wing ideology arguably do remain in the film, but they are no more than that: this cinematic Spartacus is a communal, rather than Communist, hero." The promotion of the film dwelt on the theme of freedom—particularly freedom from foreign powers—such as the *Spartacus* "spoken word" Decca album in which Simmons would read either Boudicea's address to the Britons or Hecuba's speech following the sack of Troy.[34] This was something that could just as easily be appreciated by the right as the left.

Conclusion

A study of the production of *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus* suggests that the relationships between broad political context, commercial conditions and personalities together influence the film that appears on screen. The production conditions for both of these films had equal influence upon their construction as external events. *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus* are excellent case studies that demonstrate the need to examine films in terms of Gaut's idea of multiple authorship. The multiple authors of *Spartacus* were even visible to some members of the contemporary audience if one takes Crowther's (1960) review into account: "Too many people, too many cooks had their ladles in this stew, and it comes out a romantic mish-mash of a strange episode in history."[35] As *Spartacus* was not as easy to translate to the screen as *Ben-Hur*, it seems that the variety of contributors had a detrimental effect upon the coherency of this film (just as Trumbo had feared)—while *Ben-Hur* emerged unscathed. Multiple authorship, in which individual contributions may not be clear, is not an unusual situation in the film industry and it is something that we must come to grips with in order to truly understand how history on the screen is constructed. Future investigations might consider the implications for historical films on a broader scale.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of highly successful historical television series, such as STARZ's *Spartacus* (2010–2013). This was an international collaboration that spanned a number of years and involved a revolving roster of directors, writers and cast members—thus presenting opportunities for considering the implications of multiple authorship for the small screen. Such modern adaptations also allow academics to explore how changing context influences the final product. For instance, what does the twenty-first century make of Spartacus, as opposed to the mid-twentieth century?

The recent remake of *Ben-Hur* (2016, dir. Bekmambetov) invites similar comparisons. Just as *Ben-Hur* (1959) was part of a spate of successful epics, the 2016 remake follows on from the massive success of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004, Gibson) and the so-called "Year of the Bible" in 2014. The productions of this year ranged from big budget features such as *Noah* (2014, dir. Aronofsky) and *Exodus* (2014, dir. Scott) to the smaller-scale successes like *Son of God* (2014, 20th Century Fox). On the small screen, the co-producers (Burnett and Downey) of *Ben-Hur* (2016) were the executive producers for the top cable series for the History Channel in 2013—*The Bible*—and are scheduled to produce a new series (*A.D.*). Despite an apparent dip in numbers, approximately seventy per cent of Americans still identify as Christian. The new *Ben-Hur* hopes to appeal to "an audience that feels under-served" (Chitwood 2014; cf. Malamud 2007). Hollywood seems eager to answer the call, with more biblically themed movies on the horizon. *Ben-Hur* will potentially be followed by two David and Goliath adaptations. This is the biggest resurgence of biblically themed films since the Golden Age—why now? It will be interesting to see what factors shape this *Ben-Hur* and what the classic tale has to say to the twenty-first century audience.

NOTES

1. The 1941 investigation into pro-war propaganda in film (conducted by Wheeler, Nye and Clark) met with similar lack of success (Ceplair and Englund, 1980).
2. Dalton Trumbo, Albert Maltz, Herbert Biberman, Edward Dmytryk, Adrian Scott, Alvah Bessie, Lester Cole, Ring Lardner Jnr., Samuel Ornitz and John Howard Lawson.
3. For instance, there had been a lot of tension between the main craft unions in Hollywood—the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Motion Picture Machine Operators (IATSE) and the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU).
4. A Note on the archival material: "The Year of *Spartacus*" was the proposed title for a book about the production of *Spartacus* that Kirk Douglas wanted to release

after filming was completed. The book never eventuated, but the drafts and research by the author (David Chandler) can be found in the Kirk Douglas Papers (Box 37, Folder 17–18). Key interviews with Douglas, Trumbo, Edward Lewis, Jean Simmons, Tony Curtis and Stanley Kubrick are missing from the archives, after being removed by Douglas while he was writing his autobiography. I did send a request for the return of these interviews, but Douglas's representative was unable to oblige in this matter. Thankfully, Bryna had supplied author Duncan Cooper with copies of most of these interviews in the past and Mr Cooper was kind enough to copy the interviews with Trumbo, Lewis, Simmons and Curtis for me.

5. Recap of Opinion Cards, Box 34, Folder 15, KD.
6. Office Memo from Kirk Douglas to Stan [Margulies?] cc Edward Lewis April 13, 1959, Letters, SK 9/4/5 III (the fact that this is an office memo and that M. was responsible for publicity suggests that Margulies is the recipient).
7. This slight overlap in the employment of Fast and Trumbo would not have been possible if not for the blacklist, as the SWG regulations stipulated that two writers could not be hired at the same time without each of the writers knowing about the other. In other words, if the blacklist had not forced Lewis to keep quiet about Trumbo, he would have been obliged to fire Fast (once they had decided that they preferred Trumbo's work). (Interview with Edward Lewis for "The Year of *Spartacus*" April 7, 1960 [courtesy of D. Cooper]; Interview with Dalton Trumbo for "The Year of *Spartacus*" August 2, 1960 [courtesy of D. Cooper]).
8. Notes on Spartacus: Tony Mann, Box 24, Folder 6, DT.
9. K. Cameron, "*Spartacus*," in *Sunday News* September 25 [no year given], Scrapbook, SK 9/2/1; Interview with Dalton Trumbo for "The Year of *Spartacus*" August 2, 1960 [courtesy of D. Cooper]; Roman Info for Stanley Kubrick, Box 24, Folder 6, DT.
10. Report on *Spartacus*, Box 27, Folder 6, DT; cf. Interview with Dalton Trumbo for "The Year of *Spartacus*" August 2, 1960 [courtesy of D. Cooper]; Interview with Marshall Green for "The Year of *Spartacus*" March 23, 1960, Box 38, Folder 6, KD; Interview with Irving Lerner for "The Year of *Spartacus*" June 29, 1960, Box 38, Folder 6, KD; Interview with Jean Simmons for "The Year of *Spartacus*" March 23, 1960 [courtesy of D. Cooper]; Interview with Tony Curtis for "The Year of *Spartacus*" April 1, 1960 [courtesy of D. Cooper]; A Last General Note on *Spartacus*, Box 35, Folder 22, KD; Final Scenes between Varinia and Spartacus as shot: Retakes Crucifixion, Box 39, Folder 7, KD.
11. P. Scheuer, "$12 million dollar risk taken by Kirk Douglas," in *LA Times* September 29, 1960, Scrapbook, SK 9/2/1; Interview with Marshall Green for "The Year of *Spartacus*" March 25, 1960, Box 38, Folder 6, KD; Interview with Alexander Golitzen for "The Year of *Spartacus*" March 17, 1960, Box 38, Folder 6, KD; Interview with Bob Forrest for "The Year of *Spartacus*" July 8, 1960, Box 38, Folder 6, KD; Interview with Jean Simmons for "The Year of *Spartacus*" March 24, 1960 [courtesy of D. Cooper].
12. Interview with Bob Forrest for "The Year of *Spartacus*" July 8, 1960, Box 38, Folder 6, KD; Interview with Mel Tucker for "The Year of *Spartacus*" July 8, 1960, Box 38, Folder 6, KD.

13. Report on *Spartacus*: Scene by Scene, Box 27, Folder 6, DT.
14. Report on *Spartacus*: Scene by Scene, Box 27, Folder 6, DT.
15. Material by Peter Ustinov, Box 39, Folder 5, KD; Ustinov Scenes: Typed, Box 25, Folder 3, DT; Handwritten Peter Ustinov Script: Woman and Spartacus, Box 39, Folder 12, KD; Spartacus and Crassus Confrontation, Box 24, Folder 6, DT.
16. Ustinov's Batiatus and Crassus scene, Box 24, Folder 6, DT; cf. Fast (1951), 63.
17. Note, Box 24, Folder 8, DT; Note, Box 39, Folder 14, KD; Note from Dalton Trumbo to Edward Lewis, Box 24, Folder 8, DT.
18. For the Varinia and Crassus dining scene, see Material by Peter Ustinov, Box 39, Folder 5, KD; cf. Second Draft September 22, 1958, 161–168. For the night Senate scene, see handwriting on the back of script pages clearly belonging to Ustinov, Box 39, Folder 14, KD; cf. Revised Final Script January 16, 1959, 161E–F; Final Shooting Script September 14, 1959, 173–174. For the arrest of Gracchus, see Material by Peter Ustinov, Box 39, Folder 5, KD; cf. Revised Final Script January 16, 1959, 161F–161Ia; Final Shooting Script September 14, 1959, 171–172. For the scene between Crassus and Batiatus, see Material by Peter Ustinov, Box 39, Folder 5, KD; cf. First Draft July 15, 1958, 132A–134; Second Draft September 22, 1958, 129–134; Final Script December 9, 1958; Revised Final Script January 16, 1959, 126, 127 thru 129–131, 132.

    Note, Box 24, Folder 8, DT; Note, Box 39, Folder 14, KD; Note from Dalton Trumbo to Edward Lewis, Box 24, Folder 8, DT.

    Material by Peter Ustinov, Box 39, Folder 5, KD; Typed Ustinov Batiatus and Gracchus Scene, Box 24, Folder 6. DT; cf. Revised Final Script January 16, 1959, 82–85A; Final Shooting Script September 14, 1959, 95–99; Revised Final Script January 16, 1959, 161–161B; Final Shooting Script September 14, 1959, 168–170.
19. Material by Peter Ustinov, Box 39, Folder 5, KD; Report on *Spartacus*: Scene by Scene, Box 27, Folder 6, DT; cf. Revised Final Script January 16, 1959, 161E–F; Final Shooting Script September 14, 1959, 173–174.
20. Report on *Spartacus*: Scene by Scene, Box 27, Folder 6, DT.
21. Report on *Spartacus*: Scene by Scene, Box 27, Folder 6, DT.
22. Note from Dalton Trumbo to Edward Lewis, Box 24, Folder 8, DT; Note to Stanley Kubrick and Edward Lewis, Box 35, Folder 22, KD.
23. Letter from Kirk Douglas to Howard Fast November 7, 1958, Box 33, Folder 4, KD; Letter from Kirk Douglas to Howard Fast February 12, 1959, Box 33, Folder 5, KD; Letter from Howard Fast to Kirk Douglas February 15, 1959, Box 33, Folder 5, KD; Letter from Kirk Douglas to Howard Fast May 28, 1959, Box 33, Folder 7, KD.
24. A Last General Note on *Spartacus*, Box 35, Folder 22, KD.
25. Camp of Slaves at Vesuvius 19/6/59, Box 39, Folder 16, KD; Dissolve to After First Vesuvius June 20, 1959, Box 39, Folder 16, KD.
26. Letter from Howard Fast to Kirk Douglas February 15, 1959, Box 33, Folder 5, KD.
27. A Last General Note on *Spartacus*, Box 35, Folder 22, KD.
28. Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Ralph Newman October 29, 1962, Box 116, Folder 26, UCLA.

29. Draft Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Picasso, Box 25, Folder 7, DT; Letter from Dalton Trumbo to Albert Maltz January 21, 1958 in Trumbo, 1970.
30. Notes on Hearings circa 1957, Box 59, Folder 5, DT UCLA.
31. The committee consisted of Douglas, Trumbo, Lewis and Kubrick (A Last General Note on *Spartacus*, Box 35, Folder 22, KD).
32. 'Conversations with Dalton Trumbo Part Two,' in *Cinema Canada* September/October 1969, no. 38, 25, Box 231, Folder 12, DT UCLA.
33. Interview with Dalton Trumbo for "The Year of *Spartacus*" August 2, 1960 [courtesy of D. Cooper].
34. Letter from Bob Rains to Jean Simmons August 7, 1959, Box 33, Folder 8, KD.
35. B. Crowther, "Screen: *Spartacus* Enters the Arena," *New York Times* October 7, 1960, Scrapbook, SK 9/2/1.

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CHAPTER SIX

The Peplum Era

Arthur J. Pomeroy

Treatments of the outflow of ancient world films produced in Italy between 1958 and 1965 usually begin with the figure of Joseph E. Levine and his remarkable success in marketing *Hercules* in the United States in 1959 (e.g. Pomeroy 2008: 37; Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 62–63). The emphasis on Levine is double-edged: *Hercules*' commercial returns certainly encouraged the making of more films in this style and so maintained continuous employment for many within the Italian film industry for some years after. However, the exploits of Levine need to be set in context. The echo of Barnum and Bailey ("You can fool all of the people all of the time if the marketing is right and the budget is big enough"—a repeatedly quoted aphorism never adequately sourced) is best taken as a self-aware wry comment on the mogul's role in the film industry. Alongside *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956) and *Hercules*, Levine had also imported classics of Italian neo-realism, such as *Rome: Open City* (1945) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), and ended his career as the producer of such respected fare as *The Graduate* (1967) and *The Lion in Winter* (1968). At his death, he had earned his place as lead obituary in the *New York Times* (Robertson 1967).

We should also be wary of placing too much emphasis on a single film of a particular type (the strong-man movie): the "peplum" film can be explained in terms of cinematic history and the economic conditions of the time (D'Amilio 2011) and is much more diverse than highlighting the iconic figure of Steve Reeves suggests. In order to understand *Le fatiche d'Ercole* ("The Labors of Hercules," as *Hercules* was known on release in Italy in 1958), it is important to consider the Italian tradition of ancient world films

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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as well as muscleman movies prior to 1959. Only then can we properly assess the output of peplum films in their heyday.

Italian Historical Films

From the very early days of film-making, mythological stories and ones set in the historical ancient world were popular subjects (see Chapters 1 and 2 by Michelakis and Schenk in this volume). In Italy, Pastrone's *The Fall of Troy* (*La caduta di Troia*) in 1911 and Bertolini and Padovan's *Odyssey* from the same year used epic material for grand displays and fantastic scenes based on trick photography. However, in the period before the First World War, films set in ancient Rome predominate, partially because of nationalist feelings in the new Republic and, most significantly, because of the notable characters in the storylines, whether it be a Spartacus, a Julius Caesar, or a Nero. *The Last Days of Pompeii* (dir. Ambrosio, 1908; Rodolfi, 1913) was based on Bulwer-Lytton's internationally popular novel, dealt with an event in Italian history with a spectacular disaster scenario, and possessed recognizable characters to win the audience's sympathy. A statue of the blind flower-girl, Nydia, for instance, sculpted by Randolph Rogers in the 1850s, was replicated 167 times during the artist's lifetime—a sign of the story's popularity and its widespread appeal (Metropolitan Art Museum n.d.: Nydia). The regular refashioning of the story shows that remakes are hardly the preserve of modern Hollywood. Vesuvius erupted several more times in Italy: through Gallone and Palermi's film of 1926, the L'Herbier and Moffa version of 1950, and finally Leone/Bonnard's 1959 peplum. Paul W. S. Anderson's 2014 *Pompeii* is only (presently) the most recent film vaguely descended from Bulwer-Lytton's fantasy.

The Last Days of Pompeii does not originally feature any character of unusual strength or even of remarkable masculinity. For this we must look to the gladiator Spartacus, hero of Vidali's 1913 film, and, most strikingly, to Ursus, the Bear, the bodyguard of the heroine in Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis* and the screen versions of 1913 (Guazzoni) and 1924 (D'Annunzio and Jacoby), who at the story's climax wrestles a bull to the death in the arena. Crucial, however, was Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914), which not only displayed an eruption of Mount Etna that impels the entire story and the rescue of the heroine from sacrifice to the Carthaginian deity, Moloch, but sets all against the background of the epic clash of civilizations between Rome and Carthage. The male protagonist, Fulvius Axilla, is assisted by his servant, Maciste, played by the Genoese longshoreman, Bartolomeo Pagano. Maciste, in black-face in his first screen appearance, rescues the heroine from danger, protects his master, and, after enduring lengthy torment when imprisoned at

a grinding mill, ensures the couple's final reunion. His character appealed to all segments of Italian society both as a loyal servant and the savior of the weak. The humorous aspects of Maciste (his appetite for food and wine when rescued is shown in detail) also added to his attractiveness. He quickly achieved star status well above that of other Italian actors and gained his own series. That begins with *Maciste* in 1915 where he is a contemporary Italian actor of the same name, the hero brought to life in modern times, in a film that exploits the comic possibilities of the contrast between the epic hero and his living counterpart (Reich 2015: 69–80).

Pagano was to appear in at least another eleven Italian Maciste films and four German productions before the end of the 1920s. However, another strong man had appeared in Italy, Benito Mussolini, who either directly adopted aspects of the Maciste character or drew on similar ideological currents and iconography (Reich 2015: 187–237). When, in the mid-1930s, the Fascist authorities wished to support an effort that would showcase Italian expertise in film production, a remake of *Cabiria*, the most internationally successful Italian film to that time, must have been considered. This time, however, the emphasis would be on the Roman leader in the Punic Wars, Scipio Africanus, the Duce of his day. Hence, Carmine Gallone's epic, with literally a cast of thousands, *Scipione l'africano* (1937). There was still a place for the saga of the Carthaginian princess, Sophonisba, now transformed into a recognizable screen vamp, and Cabiria, the original kidnapped heroine, is reconfigured as Velia, the Italian war captive who defies Hannibal. But the focus on Scipio within the triumphal march of Roman history leaves no room for any other popular figure: the hero is himself the embodiment of his people and their imperial aspirations (Pomeroy, forthcoming 2017).

After the demise of Fascism, post-war Italian cinema understandably avoided nationalistic themes. Blasetti's *Fabiola* (1949) with its tale of Christian martyrs in fourth-century Rome is notably different from his *The Iron Crown* (1941) that featured the search for a charismatic leader to restore a magic crown to its rightful place in Rome. *Fabiola*, L'Herbier and Moffa's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1950), and Freda's *Spartaco* (1952) all share gladiatorial games, but most importantly they also include a message of resistance to persecution that was topical after the German occupation of 1943–1945 (cf. Wyke 1997: 49–56). Truly epic film in Italy was, instead, the work of American studios, beginning with *Quo Vadis* in 1950 and later *Helen of Troy* (1956). While *The Robe* (1953) and its spin-off *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) were both filmed in Hollywood, *Quo Vadis* took advantage of the low-cost environment in post-war Rome and Italian skill in set-building at the restored Cinecittà studios. Actors enjoyed the lifestyle, and the studios were able to reinvest profits that could not be repatriated from Europe,

leading to the phenomenon known as "Hollywood on the Tiber." Other notable products of this relationship set in the classical world would be *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Cleopatra* (1963). Italian film-makers could not match the resources of the American studios, but they could engage American stars, such as Kirk Douglas, who played the hero in Camerini's *Ulysses* (1954; Paul 2013), or Anthony Quinn, the villain in *Ulysses* and in Francisci's *Attila* (1954). It is worth noting that Ennio De Concini was scriptwriter on both these films, as well as on Francisci's *Roland the Mighty* (1956), while Mario Bava had worked on *Ulysses* and *Roland* as assistant director and cinematographer/special effects director.

In brief, *Hercules* did not appear unheralded: it had a crew that were already well-versed in historically set films and its own American leading man. What was new was Greek mythology as the subject matter, rather than Roman history or Greek epic, and that the role required someone with notable muscular structure as well as matinée idol good looks. Hence the choice of Steve Reeves, a virtual unknown outside body-building circles. The figure of the strongman also lent itself to comic scenes, as it had with Maciste or other silent era musclemen such as Saltarelli, Saetta or Sansone (Reich 2015: 46–48). The disconnect between brawn and social acculturation is exploited in various scenes, such as at the beginning of the film when Hercules is shown feeding on a whole side of a sheep and offering this morsel to dainty Iole, or, in competition with the youths of Iolcus, hurling his discus so far that it disappears over the horizon. The limits of super-powers (a regular theme in DC's Superman comics) are then exploited in De Concini's script when Hercules is unable to save Iole's brother after his rash attack on the Nemean lion and is shunned not only by the populace of the city, but also by the princess. Hercules thus needs to surrender his divinity, set out on the quest for the Golden Fleece with Jason, and return to establish the rightful king on the throne of Iolcus before he can win Iole's love (Pomeroy 2013). Overall, the plot outline of fall and final triumph through the power of love is not greatly different in Disney's 1997 *Hercules*, while the comedy of the latter is already adumbrated in the 1958 version. De Francisci's *Hercules* even anticipates the structure of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey (from civilization to a strange world and return to help one's society) so beloved of Hollywood scriptwriters (e.g. Vogler 2007).

Peplum Humor

Peplum films have often been met with jocular disparagement. Yet that is equivalent to mocking Three Stooges movies: there is little point in trying to denigrate a form that is self-referentially ironic. Duccio Tessari's "ten tips for

making an historical film" (Locatelli 1960; English translation, Winkler 207: 455–456) are actually fifteen, a joke in itself, and show the light touch that he himself employed in his scriptwriting. For instance:

> A river or mountain is always pleasing. The river is better: it's long, goes well with CinemaScope, and enriches the color.

These wry remarks are as observant an assessment of widescreen filming as curmudgeonly Fritz Lang's lines in Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963), where it is suggested that the format is only suitable for snakes and funerals.

This humor acts to undercut the possibly threatening strength of the strong man, to avoid the concern about recalling Mussolini as the real life version of Maciste. In *Hercules Unchained* (1959), one of the obstacles in the way of the hero is Antaeus, played by the ex-boxing champion, Primo Carnera, "the ambling Alp." The Italian audience at least would have taken some delight in the spectacle of a real-life crowd favorite in mythological disguise taking on the screen version of the demigod. Tessari's scripts for non-Reeves Hercules films (*The Revenge of Hercules*, 1960, with Mark Forest; *Hercules Off to Conquer Atlantis*, 1961; *Hercules at the Centre of the World,* 1961: the last two with Reg Park in the lead role) show a reluctant hero required to intervene by the actions of his associates. Adventure really needs to be forced on him, whether he be kidnapped by his son and friend (*Atlantis*) or desperately descends to Hades to save his wife who has placed in a coma by none other than everyone's favorite Hammer Horror villain, Christopher Lee. He is also frequently accompanied by an irascible dwarf, a reminder of the circus freak-show origins of the strong man. Tessari likewise plays with the superhuman strength trope in his *Enter the Titans* (English title: *My Son, the Hero,* 1962). The hero, played by the ex-gymnast, Giuliano Gemma, is a Titan, but the weakest of the family, paradoxically endowed with more brains than brawn. This substantially alters the plotline from a typical Hercules film, where the hero is not infrequently required to save himself after being duped by the villains.

Simply to expect a display of beefcake in the peplums is thus to misunderstand the style. Certainly, the treatment meted out to such films by the likes of the Woolner Brothers and Nicholson and Arkoff's American International Pictures in the United States suggests that Italian humor either was not recognized or was cheerfully sacrificed in favor of action and sexual suggestiveness for the drive-in. *The Revenge of Hercules* became *Goliath and the Dragon* with footage from an incomplete American attempt at a mythological film edited in at the beginning. *Hercules Off to Conquer Atlantis* (1961) became, two years later, *Hercules and the Captive Women*, with a suitably lurid poster

accompanying it. The lengthy bar-room brawl (ignored by Hercules who is eating his meal) that opens the film is excised, as is the debate between the kings of the leading Greek states (allowing cameos for the likes of Gian Maria Volonte and Ivo Garrani) that descends to ever more pointless rhetoric—a parody of Italian politics. Add in redubbing, the replacement of the soundtrack, and the reformatting of the film for television, and it is understandable why such films, originally made by competent directors such as Mario Bava, Vittorio Cottafavi, Sergio Corbucci, Sergio Leone and Duccio Tessari, gained a bad name.

In practice, peplum comedy can vary from the slapstick to the particularly subtle. For instance, *Messalina* has a bar-room brawl early in the film. Later, Maximus, returning from a successful campaign in Armenia, comes upon a street performance of Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus*: the boasts of the eponymous braggart soldier clearly undercut the importance of the military hero. Finally, when the dozy emperor Claudius (cf. Suetonius, *Claudius* 8, 33; Juvenal, *Satires* 3.238) is ambushed by the Praetorian Guard, he lugubriously confirms the identity of the attackers ("It's the Praetorian Guard. They made me emperor. Now they intend to murder me.") and returns to his litter, asking his attendant to continue reading. The following line, "I was walking down the Sacred Way," might not be recognized by many in the audience, but those who did would have spotted the first line of Horace, *Satires* 1.9, recounting the unfortunate experience of running into a bore. One suspects that screenwriter Ennio De Concini has smuggled in an in-joke that the classically educated director, Cottafavi, would have appreciated.

The Peplum *Filone*

There can be no doubt that a very large number of films were made in Italy between 1958 and 1965, set in the ancient world or featuring classical heroes in other locations (e.g. *Maciste against the Vampires*, 1961, with Maciste renamed Goliath in the English version and a vague eastern setting). Günsberg (2005: 97) suggests that there were over 300 of these; Aubert's graph of ancient world films (2008: 196) indicates that the only equivalent period in the history of cinema was 1913–1914, when up to eighty-five such films were made per year, but that was internationally and not the output of a single country.

Such films can be labeled "sword and sandal" or "muscleman" or, more reductively "mythological" productions. None of these terms is, however, sufficient to cover the full output in this period. Hence, the use of the term "peplum," usually taken to refer to the short tunic often worn by male

heroes, which was popularized by French critics. In reality, describing a film as a "peplum" movie may have been used by film aficionados such the members of Tavernier's Lyon film club to refer to the long female dress, such as worn by Messalina in Cottafavi's 1960 film (where the female villain draws attention to her diaphanous robe by jokingly imploring her lovers not to rip her peplum). Whatever the case, peplum is now in international currency as a metonym for these films (Pomeroy 2008: 46–48). The term groups such efforts as a style, much in the manner that the terms "spaghetti western" and "*giallo*" identify specific types of films in the 1960s and 1970s that were the next major outputs of the Italian film industry. Since these are not separate genres (Westerns made by Italians in Spain are a sub-group of the Western, and *gialli* may be either seen as mysteries, crime films or horror movies), it seems best to consider these as "trends" or "streams" of film-making, in accordance the Italian use of the term "*filone*." The peplum, however, lacks the distinctiveness in film scores that marks out the other two styles or the emphasis on modern architecture and couture that can be seen in the *giallo*, let alone the extreme close-ups—of wary eyes in the Western, of murderous gloved hands in *gialli*—that still attract fans and even recreations of these films. Certain sets at Cinecittà are regularly reused (and recognizable in *Cleopatra* (1963)), as are locations that that lend themselves to filming (the Cascate di Montegelato waterfalls are regularly featured, e.g. as the idyllic home of the Amazons in *Hercules*, but the site of a military ambush in *Messalina*). Lighting and costuming that complements the richness of Technicolor is another notable feature. One might also add the nigh-obligatory dancing girls at the banquet (referenced in the opening scene of Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004)). Still, these features seem to be associated with one studio's house style and especially with one director/cinematographer (Mario Bava)—many other peplums lack such characteristics.

That leaves the body-builder protagonist as the main signifier for the peplum. The list of strong-man heroes is extensive: Hercules, Maciste, Samson, Ursus and Ulysses are a few of the names given to the leading man. They were also interchangeable according to the market: Goliath for Maciste has already been mentioned; Nisbet (2006: 50–52) indicates some of the other substitutions. It is also true that the actors can be substituted as well: first Mickey Hargitay (*The Loves of Hercules*, 1960), then Mark Forest and Reg Park replaced Steve Reeves, to be replaced in turn by Gordon Scott and the local talent, Kirk Morris (Adriano Bellini) and Alan Steel (Sergio Ciani). Reeves actually only acted in two Hercules films, moving on to the roles of Glaucus in *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1959), of Philippides in *The Giant of Marathon* (1959), of Aeneas (*The Trojan Horse,* 1961; *The Avenger*, 1962), and in two films directed by Sergio Corbucci, Romulus (*Duel of the Titans*,

1961), and the title role in *Son of Spartacus* (1962). Other films also indicate that he was being cast as an action hero in the fashion of Errol Flynn (cf. *Robin Hood*, 1938 or *The Sea Hawk*, 1940): as Hadji Murad in Riccardo Freda's *The White Warrior* (1959), based on Tolstoy's novel; as Henry Morgan in *Morgan the Pirate* (1960); as Karim in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1961); and as Sandokan in *Sandokan the Great* (1963) and *The Pirates of Malaysia* (1964).

The definition of a peplum as an Italian film of a certain period starring a body-builder thus has obvious deficiencies. Claude Aziza (1998:11) has suggested the additional proviso that the film be set in the period before the fall of Constantinople in 1453, thus including medieval dramas but excluding the second list of Reeves' films. This leaves a problem with fantasy films set in an indefinite period (e.g. Reg Park in *Ursus, the Terror of the Khirghiz*, English title: *Hercules, Prisoner of Evil*, 1964). The Maciste series already had most often showed the hero in modern times: for instance, combatting the Austrian army in *Maciste alpino* (1916) or restoring the rightful king of the fictitious nation of Sirdegna—with Saetta as his sidekick—in *Maciste imperatore* (1924). Freda's *Maciste in Hell* (English title: *The Witch's Curse*, 1962) takes place in Renaissance Scotland, offering an homage to Brignone's film of the same name (1926) that places the hero in a Dantesque Inferno. In brief, while the use of the term, peplum, is useful, it is also a very porous vessel. Its inclusivity is not a fault, but rather signals the nature of film-making, where elements of one style are often mixed with others.

Francisci's *Hercules* can be seen as initiating the peplum movement, but the term peplum comes to envelope other historically set adventures films that would have been made anyway. Early Roman times were popular, with the tale of Romulus and Remus (*Duel of the Titans,* dir. Sergio Corbucci, 1961, with Steve Reeves as Romulus), the Rape of the Sabines (*Romulus and the Sabines*, with Roger Moore as Romulus, 1961) and the duel between the Horatii and Curiatii (*Duel of the Champions*, 1961, starring Alan Ladd) all receiving their own films. Furthermore, Vittorio Cotttafavi's *The Revolt of the Gladiators* (English title, *The Warrior and the Slave Girl*, 1958) pre-dates the Kirk Douglas *Spartacus* (1960) in its depiction of a slave revolt against the power of Rome. However, the film has a twist: the real enemy is the Armenian queen (played by regular femme fatale, Gianna Maria Canale) who is only defeated by an alliance of Romans and gladiators. As Wyke has shown (1997: 41–56), the revolt of Spartacus is depicted in Italian film as a popular uprising against injustice, not as a rejection of governmental power in itself. In Vidali's 1913 version, the hero defeats Crassus who cooperates with him in reforming the state; in Freda's 1952 film, he is the voice of moderation, coopted and betrayed not only by the Roman aristocracy (incarnated in

Crassus's seductive daughter—Canale once more), but also by his own followers who rashly attack the Roman army in his absence and are soundly defeated. Cottafavi's *Legions of Cleopatra* (English title: *Legions of the Nile*, 1959) likewise portrays Roman government under Octavian as preferable to the misrule of Cleopatra who has bewitched Mark Antony. Finally, Belinda Lee's very, very bad vamp in Cottafavi's *Messalina* (1960; original title, *Messalina, Venus* (as) *Empress*) considerably surpasses Susan Hayward's adulteress in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), leading to a final bloodbath as the only way to preserve Claudius's rule. In this case, the hero and Roman general Maximus becomes convinced that the fault is not any class conflict between aristocracy and populace, but the existence of autocracy as a pretended mediator, and leaves to join the early Christians. Production of *The Revolt of the Gladiators* certainly pre-dates the international success of *Hercules*, although the latter's success may well have influenced Columbia Pictures (a major studio) to release the film in the United States in 1959. It is only after these Roman historical efforts that Cottafavi produces a "standard" peplum in *The Revenge of Hercules* (1960), followed by *Hercules Off to Conquer Atlantis,* both films that nevertheless conform to the director's conservative politics (Pomeroy 2008: 50–54). Similarly, Mario Bava's *Hercules at the Centre of the World* (1961), with the same actor as Cottafavi had used in *Atlantis* (Reg Park) in the lead role, displays the director's typical trick photography and gothic-horror style. The peplum did not consume the Italian film industry; rather, it offered opportunities that were accepted when the film-makers were ready.

The Gladiator Peplum

In the United States, Spartacus the gladiator as portrayed in Bird's *The Gladiator*, first performed in 1831, was a symbol of the struggle for the independence of an enslaved nation (America as Thrace, Great Britain as Rome). More controversially, he could reflect the hopes for liberty of anyone in slavery (Malamud 2009: 54–55). The self-sacrifice of Draba (Woody Strode) that saves Spartacus' life and begins the rebellion in the 1960 film should be seen as a statement of support for the civil rights movement. Perhaps, for that reason, gladiators were much less a part of Hollywood films than they were in Italy. Killing others for sport was depicted as inhuman: Marcus, the protagonist of Ernest Schoedsack's *Last Days of Pompeii* (1935), only gains salvation at the end of the film when he sacrifices himself to rescue his adopted son (the child of a man he has killed in the arena), and Victor Mature in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* is initially a rather odd pacifist

gladiator (following his Christian beliefs) who goes berserk after other gladiators cause the death of his beloved. Christopher Plummer's Commodus in Anthony Mann's *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) is not merely a bad emperor because he enjoys gladiatorial games and practices gladiatorial fighting himself, but because he has gladiatorial blood in his veins. The son of an adulterous relationship between a gladiator and Marcus Aurelius's wife is not fit to run an empire. Russell Crowe is admirable in *Gladiator* (2000) because he is forced to become a fighter in the arena, because he despises the sport and even the onlookers, and because his success is based on military training that emphasizes the team rather than the individual. Even mortally wounded he is more than a match for the "fake" fighting skills of Commodus. Since then, Kit Harrington has repeated this feat as a treacherously defeated Briton in the arena of *Pompeii* (2014).

It would appear that American distributors had an ambivalent reaction to the use of "gladiator" in film titles. Freda's *Spartacus* (1952) was released as *The Sins of Rome*; Cottafavi's *The Revolt of the Gladiators* (1958) as *The Warrior and the Slave Girl*. On the other hand, *Under the Standard of Rome* (1959), perhaps because it starred Anita Ekberg, became *Sheba and the Gladiator*, even if the male protagonist was a Roman consul fighting and also trying to save Zenobia of Palmyra.

However, this changes with *The Invincible Gladiator* (1961). In *Demetrius and the Gladiators,* Victor Mature had indirectly caused the downfall of Caligula, but here ex-gladiator, now army commander Reties (Rezio) leads a rebellion against the evil emperor Rabirius. In Richard Harrison, muscular and handsome, a fully adequate substitute had been found for Steve Reeves, without the need for body-building routines. A successful effort demands remakes: Harrison overthrows the evil king of Sparta who had forced him to become a gladiator in *Gladiators 7* (1962), Domitian and his Egyptian mistress in *The Revolt of the Praetorians* (1964), and Commodus in *The Two Gladiators* (1964). The last invites comparison with *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1965) and *Gladiator* (2000). Commodus is a standard villain (played by peplum stalwart Mimmo Palmara) who lusts after the new girl in the court (Marcia, all the way from Sabinia, the home of the Sabines) and plunders his subjects and the senate to gain money for his popular gladiatorial shows. However, it turns out that he has a twin (Lucius Crassus(!), played by Richard Harrison) who, like Romulus was meant to be drowned in the Tiber, but was rescued and has grown up to become a Roman army commander. He organizes an army (the men in red capes) revolt against the emperor and his Praetorians (the men in black), but is captured and forced to fight his twin in the arena. Here the combatants compete in helmets that mask their faces, contrary to the usual trope that the leading actors fight with their faces visible,

which generates some suspense until it is revealed that Lucius has indeed killed the emperor. Guided by Horatius (Giuliano Gemma), a distant predecessor of Cicero in *Gladiator*, the Roman army arrives in time to defeat the Praetorians in a battle in the arena. Lucius rewards his friends, but declines imperial power, bestowing that instead on senator Pertinax.

If *Two Gladiators*' descent can be traced back to Dumas's *Man in the Iron Mask* (Part 3 of the novel, *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne*, serialized from 1847 to 1850) as a historical romance, it was also possible to mix muscleman exploits and rebellion. In *Ursus the Rebel Gladiator* (1962; English title, *The Rebel Gladiators*), Dan Vadis plays Ursus, who defeats but spares Commodus in the arena, allowing the treacherous emperor to resume his evil deeds before being overthrown. A year later, under the name of Roccia ("the Rock"), he engages in a number of shows of strength (e.g. pushing down supporting beams to cause the roof to cave in or simply carrying his girlfriend on one arm) as part of a gladiatorial troop that assists in the overthrow of Nero (Gianni Rizzo, channeling Peter Ustinov from *Quo Vadis*) and his evil minion, Tigellinus (Mimmo Palmara again), in *Ten Gladiators* (1963). The mixture of comedy and action was sufficiently attractive to audiences to result in two sequels, also involving Dan Vadis and his fellow gladiators: *The Triumph of the Ten Gladiators* (1964), set on the border between Parthia and Rome, and *Spartacus and the Ten Gladiators* (also 1964), where the gladiators, after being duped into attacking Spartacus, eventually join in the main gladiatorial rebellion.

In line with B-movies and (increasingly) television productions of the time, these gladiator films were cheaply made with limited casts and sets that are regularly re-used. The move to the simpler, but unstable Eastmancolor process in later peplums has led to washed-out prints that further diminish these films' reputation, particularly in the public-domain versions from television-formatted prints that are most easily accessible. However, this "popcorn fare" can be quite revealing in identifying the plotlines and ideology that underpin much more expensive ancient world films up to the present.

The Peplum Audience

Due to the large number of body-builders who starred in peplums, the style is often associated with a male audience and the male gaze. Günsberg (2005: 131) and Blanshard and Shahabudin stress the appeal to the filmgoers who attended mass-market cinemas in Italy. Strong-man films would be particularly attractive to migrants from the economically depressed south of Italy

working in northern factories as valuing physical prowess over wealth and style. There may be some truth in the suggestion that cheaply produced films would be attractive to the second and third tier of cinemas, with their predominantly younger male audiences. Certainly the peplums could be shown over a wide circuit, the print sometimes travelling for years in small, rural theatres, which was not the case with Italian art-house films.

However, as we have seen, a substantial proportion of "peplums" were not in the Hercules mode. *Damon and Pythias* (1962; Berti 2008), a classical tale of male homosociality, has its historical setting in Hellenistic Syracuse. Carmine Gallone's contribution to the genre, *Carthage in Flames* (1960), very loosely adapted from Emilio Salgari's 1906 novel, which can be seen as a palinode to his *Scipione Africano* (1937), is an historical romance that treats the Third Punic War from the viewpoint of the Carthaginian victims. Francisci's *Sappho, Venus of Lesbos* (1960; English Title: *The Warrior Empress*), takes place in a mythologized Mytilene, with Kerwin Matthews from *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (1958) as male lead and Tina Louise as his love interest: the pairing would be as likely to attract a female audience as males. The plot of this film and Francisci's *Siege of Syracuse* (1960), where Louise is in love with both Archimedes and the Roman general Marcellus, show two male aspirants for the heroine's favors, the reverse of the stock two women fighting over one man (Tessari's "rules" favor the latter combination). While not trained as a muscleman, Rory Calhoun, who fights off opponents on the arms of the *Colossus of Rhodes* (Sergio Leone, 1961), is likely to have been as attractive to women internationally as he claimed to be in Hollywood.

The peplum thus appealed to a wide range of viewers, some of whom admired the male physique, while others were attracted by the coded beauty of the female stars (Pomeroy 2013: 194–198). An American poster for *Carthage in Flames* (Figure 6.1) displays the heroine about to be sacrificed to the fire god, with the tagline "Ravaged by the Raging Roman Legions!"—not quite false advertising, as the words are true of Carthage, but clearly designed to attract young males. The male body is not only more exposed in practice, but also open to mutilation. Hercules bears the claw marks of the Nemean lion in Francisci's 1958 film, and other male heroes are frequently tortured. The resulting iconography is often similar to that bestowed on Christian martyrs (Wyke 1998: 53–54): this grants a semi-religious status to the hero that overrides the sadomasochistic overtones of the depiction, troubling to a modern viewer, but fully acceptable in its time, that can be related to the Madonna–Magdalene dichotomy for female characters in the peplum. The subject deserves a proper study.

Figure 6.1 American poster for *Carthage in Flames* (1960).

The End of the Peplum

The stream of ancient world films dries up around 1964–1965. Partially this might be attributed to the increasingly comic tone of such films. Representative is the 1965 omnibus peplum *Hercules, Samson, Maciste, and Ursus: the Invincible* (English title: *Samson and His Mighty Challenge*), parodied in the 1994 Australian cult hit, *Hercules Returns.* However, the main explanation is that greater opportunities were opening up for filming Westerns in Spain. The last peplums from Leone (*Colossus*), Corbucci (*Son of Spartacus*), and Tessari (*Enter the Titans*) date from 1961–1962. Leone released *Fistful of Dollars* in 1964, Corbucci *Minnesota Clay* in 1965 and *Django* the year after, with Tessari converting the Odyssey to *The Return of Ringo* in 1965. Francisci was almost in retirement after *Hercules, Samson, and Ulysses* (1963); Cottafavi, like Franco Rossi, had moved on to quality television; and Bava was opening the way for the *giallo* style. Hollywood was late to the party with *The 300 Spartans* (1961: Nikoloutsos 2013) and *Jason and the Argonauts* (1964: Ormand 2013): both films have closer links to earlier Hollywood features (Rossen's 1956 *Alexander*; Harryhausen's "dynamation" in *7th Voyage of Sinbad*) than to the Italian peplum. Mythological/fantasy films continued to be made, as would (more recently) epics set in ancient Greece and Rome. Just as we can distantly recognize *Cabiria* in scenes from *Carthage in Flames* or *The Colossus of Rhodes*, there are echoes of the films discussed in this chapter in *Troy* and HBO–BBC *Rome.* But the peplum, firmly rooted in time and place, had ceased to be.

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PART II

COMEDY, DRAMA, AND ADAPTATION

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hollywood Meets Art-House Cinema: Michael Cacoyannis's "Hybrid" Euripidean Trilogy

Anastasia Bakogianni

Hollywood has so far exhibited little interest in adapting Greek tragedy. Still, a number of independent directors have been inexorably drawn to its monumental heroes and heroines and the terrible dilemmas they face. The disturbing plots of Greek tragedy offer this type of film-maker the creative scope to formulate deeply personal responses to these ancient stories: stories that are invested not so much with the glamour of the classical past, but rather with the intellectual and cultural capital of ancient Greece, credited as the cradle of Western civilization. Among the famous names that have engaged with Greek tragedy in the filmic medium, such as Paolo Pasolini, Lars von Trier and Werner Herzog,[1] one director stands out because he was the only one to create a thematically linked trilogy of cinematic receptions.[2] The Greek-Cypriot Michael Cacoyannis (1921–2011) modeled three of his films directly on Euripidean plays. *Electra* (1962), *The Trojan Women* (1971) and *Iphigenia* (1977) are adaptations of the ancient tragedian's *Electra* (dated to between 422 and 413 BC), *Troades* (415 BC) and *Iphigenia at Aulis* (c. 406/5 BC), respectively. More importantly, Cacoyannis's Euripidean trilogy deserves close attention because of its "hybrid" cinematic style that combines elements from both Hollywood and European art-house cinema to create a uniquely neo-Hellenic response to Greek tragedy.

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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Cinema and television are popular mediums, but in the modern world Greek tragedy has come to be seen as an elitist cultural product with limited commercial appeal. This is another reason why Hollywood has never attempted to adapt Greek tragedy. Its shocking plotlines, which famously include incest in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (c. 429–425 BC), infanticide in Euripides' *Medea* (431 BC) and the killing of the men and the enslavement of the women of a captured city in his *Troades*, are not the stuff Hollywood blockbusters are made of. One of Cacoyannis's main preoccupations, however, was to demonstrate the continued appeal of Greek tragedy (1984: 225). His plan was to capitalize on cinema's ability to reach large audiences to once again turn Greek tragedy into popular entertainment as it was in fifth-century BC Athens. This is also the reason why Cacoyannis preferred Euripides to either Aeschylus or Sophocles. He felt a special affinity for Euripides because "his whole attitude towards war, religion, towards human relationships is just that much closer to us today" (1984: 214). Cacoyannis, like many other twentieth- and twenty-first-century practitioners, understood Euripides as an anti-war poet who condemned violence and oppression, especially when committed against women and children.

A "Hybrid" Style

In his classification of films modeled on Greek dramas according to their degree of adaptation, Kenneth MacKinnon placed Cacoyannis's trilogy in the "realistic mode" (1986: 74). Such filmic adaptations create the illusion of realism in terms of narrative, characterization and setting. Popular cinema has traditionally privileged realism. Cacoyannis's decision to explain away many of the ambiguities of plot development and characterization he discovered in the Euripidean dramas which he had selected reflect his commitment to fostering the illusion of realism in cinema. But they also testify to his desire to enlist the power of the modern medium of cinema to protest war, violence and political injustice. Cacoyannis's Euripidean trilogy belongs to the generation of adaptations of Greek tragedy that harness its cultural capital in the service of a liberal political agenda, a trend incidentally that persists in theatrical adaptations of Greek drama to this day. The trilogy's political messages are only partially "masked" (Cf. MacKinnon 1986: 74). *The Trojan Women* and *Iphigenia* openly endorse the key tenets of the anti-war movement that gained momentum in the sixties and seventies. The seeds of this approach can also be found in the earlier *Electra* (Bakogianni 2015: 291).

Independent cinema valorizes the concept of the auteur, the director as "film artist" able to express his/her personal vision rather than merely being

a craftsman in the service of commercial concerns. Authorship in film is a hotly contested issue in Film Studies (Sellors 2010) since film-making is without a doubt a collaborative process. What cannot be contested, however, is that Michael Cacoyannis was the guiding hand that shaped the trilogy in accordance with a highly personal creative vision. He was the driving force behind all three film-projects, involved in all aspects of production. In addition to directing all three movies, he was instrumental in raising the necessary funds.[3] He chose his actors very carefully and worked closely with them to ensure that they delivered the performances he needed to fulfill his directorial vision. For example, he found working with Vanessa Redgrave on *The Trojan Women* particularly problematic, because she arrived on set without a lot of preparation. Cacoyannis felt he had to push her in order to get the emotive performance he needed from her in the key role of Andromache (Siafkos 2009: 185; and see Figure 7.1). He was equally careful in selecting his other key collaborators. For example, he asked the famous Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis (1925–) to provide the soundtrack for the trilogy. Theodorakis's music was carefully crafted to underscore Cacoyannis's visuals. The director wrote the scripts for *Electra* and *Iphigenia*, and in the case of *The Trojan Women* chose Edith Hamilton's translation (1937), which he thought "masterly" (McDonald and Winkler 2001: 80). Nonetheless, he modified her translation to bring it more into line with his own concept for the film.[4]

Figure 7.1 Michael Cacoyannis directs Vanessa Redgrave in *The Trojan Women* © The Michael Cacoyannis Foundation.

Cacoyannis's desire to remain true to his directorial design for the trilogy is manifest in the great care he took with all aspects of production. In this he resembles other independent film-makers who valued their freedom of expression and found it hard to work within the confines of the Hollywood studio system. Cacoyannis's single Hollywood success was *Zorba the Greek* (1964), but his experiences working with United Artists (who helped finance and distribute *Electra*) and Twentieth Century-Fox (*Zorba*) convinced him that he preferred to work more independently (Siafkos 2009: 136 and 159–165). After the suffocating atmosphere of Hollywood Cacoyannis was delighted to once again be able to work independently on *The Trojan Women* (Siafkos 2009: 183). In his oeuvre Cacoyannis appropriated what he felt he could use from Hollywood in terms of narrative style and technique, but invested them with his own unique directorial style (Karalis 2012: 69).

Cacoyannis's *Electra* was produced in the same decade as big Hollywood epics set in antiquity like *Spartacus* (1960), *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). The notorious excesses of the second and the disappointing financial returns of the latter brought the reign of the "sword and sandal" epic to an end, until, that is, its renaissance in the twenty-first century with films like *Gladiator* (2000) and *300* (2006). But three films proudly citing Greek tragedy as their model automatically position themselves as what in Greece was labeled "quality cinema." In other words, high art in a popular medium. Cacoyannis was following in the footsteps of other European art-house directors who privileged originality and variety as opposed to what they saw as the crass commercialism of the Hollywood system. European cinema created its own distinctive identity by emphasizing its difference from the American model of film production. Although not uniformly the case, "the sense of art as being the defining characteristic of European film" has persisted (Vincendeau 1998: 440). European art-house cinema also sought to reconnect with the early mission statement of cinema as a modern art form that transcends the divide between high and popular artistic forms of expression and has educational as well as entertainment value (Michelakis and Wyke 2013: 5–9). Cacoyannis's trilogy is a product of this cinematic tradition.

Independent cinema evolved its own distinctive means of distribution. Art-house cinemas were established in large metropolitan centers and film festivals dedicated in part or wholly to art-house films were set up to promote independent movies. In terms of audiences, art-house movies became "the preserve of a learned, highly specialized culture" (Sorlin 1991: 155). Cacoyannis's Euripidean trilogy joined this art-cinema circuit and its reception was assured through repeated screenings at various film festivals around the world.[5] Spectators who choose to watch such "quality" films expect to

engage in a more "active" type of viewing experience. They are not there simply to be entertained, but to watch a movie that engages their critical faculties. Cacoyannis's "hybrid" trilogy does indeed demand a greater degree of engagement from the viewer than your typical Hollywood blockbuster set in antiquity. But the director sought to draw an emotive as well as an intellectual response from his audiences. He wanted them to suffer along with his female protagonists, to share in Electra's desire for revenge and its tragic consequences, to lament with Hecuba and the other Trojan women and to be horrified by Iphigenia's sacrifice on the altar of war.

Increasingly there is an acknowledgement in Film Studies that "films are somatically experienced" (de Luca 2014: 9). *Electra*, *The Trojan Women* and *Iphigenia* actively seek to engage all the viewer's senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. Aural and other non-verbal sensory stimuli are particularly important in reinforcing Cacoyannis's overall design and complementing the film's dialogue. For example, in the scene of Andromache's agonizing parting from Astyanax in *The Trojan Women,* Vanessa Redgrave suits actions to words. Upon first hearing the news that the Greeks plan to kill her son (played by Alberto Sanz), Andromache utters a wordless cry that rises in intensity to a scream. Her first reaction thus goes beyond words, because words simply cannot do justice to the depth of her maternal grief. Later on, as she utters her final farewell to her son, she holds onto his arm, strokes and embraces him and smells his hair (lines 757–763 in Euripides). This multisensory act of maternal love reinforces the emotive impact of Andromache's abbreviated mourning ritual. She throws dust on her head and body while her son is still alive and in her presence since Neoptolemus's ship that carries her away from Troy begins its journey as the death sentence is carried out. This is but one memorable example from Cacoyannis's trilogy of how the director utilized both Hollywood and art-house techniques to create an anti-war spectacle precisely calibrated to enlist the audience's support on the side of the victims.

Beginnings and Endings

Cacoyannis's trilogy blends together "stylized/poetic" and "popularized/filmic" elements.[6] These reflect its debt to both art-house and Hollywood filmic idioms. To showcase this hybrid style one needs only examine the prologue and finale of each of the three movies. Cacoyannis bolted on very different beginnings and endings to all three films, changes that reveal his personal reading of Euripides' source texts. *Electra* begins with the return and murder of Agamemnon and concludes with an unexpectedly tragic

ending. *The Trojan Women* opens with scenes of the Greek soldiers herding the women of Troy and forcibly separating them from their children and finishes with an empty landscape wreathed in smoke. At the beginning of *Iphigenia* the Greek army degenerates into an unruly mob, but the film ends with the same army sailing to Troy under the baleful eye of Clytemnestra.

Ancient tragedians could take for granted a knowledgeable audience familiar with the myths on which the plots of Greek tragedy are based (the exception in our surviving corpus being Aeschylus's *Persians*, a play that mythologizes a contemporary historical event). Cacoyannis knew that he could not assume such prior knowledge on the part of his audiences, so he added prologues that set the scene as he saw it for non-knowledgeable spectators. He also modified the endings so that they better reflected his directorial vision of the ancient dramas upon which they were modeled. The former is a concession that makes the trilogy more accessible to the wider public, while the later testifies to how the director stamped the material with his own reading of Euripides' source texts.

Electra begins with a brief verbal piece of narration also spelled out with intertitles that informs the audience of Agamemnon's victory at the war at Troy and his triumphant return. Such an omniscient male narrator had been used extensively in Hollywood epics to establish an authoritative version of the backstory. The camera then focuses on a tense, ringed female hand that turns out to be Clytemnestra's. She is waiting for her victorious husband. Cacoyannis places his Clytemnestra (Aleka Katselli) in the position of the watcher, the servant the Aeschylean queen ordered to be on the lookout for the lit beacon fires that announce victory in the opening of *Agamemnon*. Katselli's grim visage contrasts sharply with the joy on the faces of the crowd that cheer Agamemnon as he passes by on his chariot. Agamemnon enters through the famous Lions' Gate of Mycenae and is formally greeted by his wife and his young children Electra and Orestes. Small gestures, such as a young Electra brushing off her mother's hand from her shoulder, while Agamemnon extends a conciliatory hand towards his wife, reveal the tensions that exist in this family without the need for any words. In fact, with the exception of the voice of the narrator and Clytemnestra's cry of "Strike," addressed to Aegisthus in a crucial moment during the commission of the murder, the prologue is silent, allowing the story to be told through the visuals, enhanced by Theodorakis's music. Stylistically this was a bold choice that pays homage to cinema's silent beginnings. But it also highlights the camera's power in the medium, as images replace words. What the audience sees is as important, or arguably more important than the dialogue. The claustrophobic scene of Agamemnon's murder in the bath sets up the revenge narrative and renders it more justifiable. But this cinematic prologue

also destroys the shock of the opening of the Euripidean play, which begins with a monologue by the peasant whom Electra was forced to marry. The ancient tragedian must have surprised his audience by locating a drama about Electra not at the tomb of Agamemnon, or the royal palace, but at a humble peasant's hut. Cacoyannis's prologue lends his adaptation a note of high tragedy that is missing from Euripides' source text.

A tragic ending, which replaces the epiphany of the Dioscuri with which Euripides' play concludes, reinforces this tone of high tragedy set in Cacoyannis's prologue. The avenging siblings enjoy the people's support throughout the film, but this changes during their commission of the matricide. The shocked faces of the women of the countryside and the peasants reveal that this unnatural crime costs Electra (Irene Papas) and Orestes (Giannis Fertis) their city's support. Cacoyannis replaces Euripides' divine "solution" and offers modern audiences an Electra and Orestes who choose to accept their people's judgment. Their final act is one of self-punishment, their sentence exile. The film ends without words as it began. Orestes heads in one direction and Electra in another. But he silently commands the loyal Pylades (Takis Emmanuel) to go after his sister. Electra walks past the women of the chorus who supported her throughout the movie and starts her journey down a long road, menaced by dark clouds above. The end credits begin to roll as the eye of the camera follows her down this windy path. As MacKinnon rightly asks: "why the guilty end?" (1986: 80)—especially after the director took such care to enlist the audience's sympathy on behalf of Electra and her brother. Part of the answer lies in viewer expectations. Modern audiences assume that a Greek tragedy has to end tragically with death, destruction and misfortune taking center stage (Bakogianni 2008: 122).

Cacoyannis replaced the unusual divine prologue of the *Troades*, which features Poseidon and Athena discussing the fate of Troy and the future of the invading Greeks, with a prologue focusing on the cruelty of the victors against their female prisoners. This change radically skews our perspective on Euripides' drama, which then becomes a catalogue of misery and suffering for Hecuba (Katharine Hepburn) and the other Trojan prisoners. The Olympian perspective provided by the divine conversation is lost. This is Greek tragedy for a secular world where prayers to the gods always go unanswered.[7] The omniscient narrator also makes it clear that the real casus belli of the Trojan War was not Helen but the Greeks' lust for Trojan gold. The film ends with the Trojan women's final lament for their city, which mirrors Andromache's earlier individual ritual for her condemned son. After the Greek soldiers torch the remaining ruins of Troy the women fall to the ground. The camera focuses on a hand desperately clutching a handful of

their homeland's precious soil. They are thus visually, but by extension also tactilely connected to Troy. In this final scene Cacoyannis replaces much of Euripides' text with visuals. The camera tracks the Trojan women led by Hecuba as they crest the hill and disappear heading towards the ships that will carry them away from their beloved homeland. The film is dedicated to "all those who fearlessly oppose the oppression of man by man." Thus the last word the viewer is left with at the very end is a modern political reading of the ancient tragedy as opposing war and injustice.[8]

Cacoyannis made the most changes to his ancient model in his *Iphigenia*. The highly problematic text of *Iphigenia at Aulis* (Gurd 2005: 9) allowed Cacoyannis greater freedom of interpretation. The director introduced over half an hour of added material before the events that are depicted in our source text as it survives. Instead of the scene of Agamemnon's conversation with his slave when he sends him to prevent his daughter's arrival in Aulis, the movie begins with a shot of the burning sun accompanied by the sound of cicadas. A written introduction this time, unaccompanied by a voiceover, sets the scene. What is noteworthy about Cacoyannis's prologue is that the Greek army becomes another chorus in *Iphigenia*, but it is far from supportive. Hot, hungry and bored, the Greek soldiers prove themselves a hostile force. In Euripides' play, where the army is only referred to, but never seen on stage, the threat they represent is implicit rather than explicit. In the film, the viewers witness first-hand the army's unrest and discontent and Agamemnon's tenuous control over them, thus setting the scene and rationalizing the events to come.

Cacoyannis offers his audience secular reasons why Iphigenia must die. Spurred on by his fear that he will lose his power over the Greeks, Agamemnon (Kostas Kazakos) leads a party that hunts down the priests' animals. The sacred deer is accidentally killed during this raid. It is this incident that sparks Calchas's hatred of the king of Argos. Calchas (Dimitri Aronis) manufactures the prophecy that the gods demand Iphigenia's death to avenge himself on Agamemnon. The king goes along with this so-called prophecy out of fear and ambition. His motivation is made clear in a critical night scene when the agitated soldiers gather around his compound to demand action. Calchas cleverly waits until Agamemnon agrees to the sacrifice before revealing the full extent of the "prophecy." Agamemnon's first reaction is to categorically refuse to go along with this plan to kill his daughter, but the wily Odysseus (Christos Tsagas) succeeds in changing his mind by ordering the guards to let the army into the courtyard where they proceed to sing an abbreviated version of the second choral song describing their future conquest of Troy (*IA* 762–780).[9] Faced with the army's lust for blood and the spoils of war, Agamemnon gives in and agrees to the sacrifice.

In this cinematic reading Agamemnon chose to sacrifice his daughter on the altar of his ambition. The final film in the trilogy also ends tragically in the modern sense of the word as ending in catastrophe. There is no last minute divine rescue. Ironically the winds begin to blow as Iphigenia (Tatiana Papamoschou) is climbing to the top of the hill where Calchas awaits her. She attempts to escape, but is captured and killed. The audience's last image of her is of her face wreathed in mist. In an interview included among the extra material in the Greek DVD of the trilogy (2005), Cacoyannis argued that the myth of Iphigenia's miraculous rescue was rooted in the army's guilt over what they had done. And in his cinematic reception the army is certainly complicit, as indeed is her father. Clytemnestra (Irene Papas) is convinced that her daughter's sacrifice was nothing more than an underhanded act of murder. The film ends on a powerful visual. Clytemnestra gazes at the Greek fleet as it sails away. Her black hair flutters wildly in the wind. The viewer literally "sees" the world through Clytemnestra's eyes. The freeze frame on which the film concludes is a close-up of Clytemnestra's face, partly obscured by her loose black hair, her eyes blazing with hatred. With the severing of her bond with Iphigenia, Clytemnestra the mother has been utterly annihilated (Bakogianni 2013a: 232). The new Clytemnestra that has risen from the ashes has but one purpose in life: to avenge her daughter. Cacoyannis's Euripidean trilogy thus comes full circle back to the beginning and the murder of Agamemnon in the first film. But now his and the audience's perspective on this pivotal event has changed radically.

Vrasidas Karalis criticizes *Iphigenia* for being infused with "the Hollywood aesthetic of the grand spectacle" (2012: 183). And it is true that over the course of the three films Cacoyannis's reception of Euripides' dramas gradually became more "filmic" and less rooted in his sources' theatrical origins. The influence of the Hollywood idiom became more pronounced and audience expectations were always an important consideration for Cacoyannis. Nonetheless he deserves the title of "a poet of the modern Greek cinema" (Pendergast and Pendergast 2000: 148). He remained true to his own very personal vision of Euripides' dramaturgy and included a number of elements that have their roots in more independent cinematic styles. In the Euripidean trilogy the chorus is one of the most prominent "stylized/poetic" elements of Cacoyannis's cinematic adaptation. Many directors have faced the thorny question of how to effectively utilize the Greek chorus in a way that modern audiences can understand. In *Electra* the women of the countryside act as a recognizably Greek chorus, but they are also a natural part of the rural environment into which the heroine is thrust after her expulsion from the palace. The captive Trojan women's synchronized movements and song come perhaps the closest to their role as the chorus in our source text. In *Iphigenia*

Cacoyannis dispensed with the original chorus and replaced them with a group of young girls who act as Iphigenia's retinue. But the film's true chorus is the menacing soldiers of the Greek army for whom Iphigenia becomes prey. The chorus and its portrayal in the trilogy is thus a highly visible reminder that these movies have their basis in a very different tradition and medium.

Heroines and Villains in Close-Up

One of the main aims of realism is to encourage spectator identification with the protagonist(s) and the viewer's "involvement in the story" (Michelakis 2013: 44). Cacoyannis set up a clear dichotomy between heroes and villains in the trilogy or, to be more precise, heroines and their male oppressors, as the director largely favored the female perspective. He was convinced that Euripides was a proto-feminist (McDonald and Winkler 2001: 75). Euripidean *dramatis personae* are highly complex creations open to multiple interpretations. Cacoyannis chose to rationalize many of these contradictory characteristics and to present his audience with a clear-cut choice of whose side they should be on. His prologues signpost this clearly for his viewers, but his endings put the final seal of approval on his heroes and heroines. Cacoyannis's desire to smooth out the ambiguities of his tragic models and to manipulate his viewers' responses to his trilogy owes a debt to mainstream cinema's oversimplified characterization. Other independent directors have, however, also chosen this approach. For example, Lars Von Trier in his *Medea* (1988) interpreted Euripides' drama as a proto-feminist play in which he gave the tragic heroine "all the rights," to use Irene Papas's phrase in referring to Cacoyannis's characterization of Electra (McDonald and Winkler 2001: 89). A key weapon in the director's arsenal in setting up this sharp black and white contrast is the filmic technique of the close-up. Unlike theater (especially ancient Greek drama in which actors wore masks), the camera allows the film-maker to zoom in on facial expressions. Close-ups of the actors' face and eyes reinforce the illusion that the audience enjoys intimate access to the characters' emotions. The close-up can thus be used to manipulate the audience into empathizing with certain characters, while rejecting the validity of others' words. The camera becomes an internal commentator that sways the audience by its close focus on specific details.

In *Electra* Clytemnestra and her paramour Aegisthus are irredeemably evil. The audience watches them trap and murder Agamemnon in his bath in the prologue and witness a young Electra's despair and grief. The camera focuses on her face as she empathically suffers along with her father as he is being

killed. This negative impression of the ruling couple is reinforced throughout the film. Cacoyannis added a scene in which Electra visits the tomb of her father. In Greek tragedy this happens only in Aeschylus's *Choephori*, but the scene has become a key feature of Electra's reception in the visual arts (Bakogianni 2011: 119). Her ritual of mourning is interrupted by Aegisthus's attack. He and his henchmen arrive on horseback and terrorize Electra and the chorus. While his men restrain her, Aegisthus slaps the heroine. Close-ups of his arrogant expression and his enjoyment of her pain make her rant over his dead body later in the film that much more understandable. In Euripides' text the defilement of Agamemnon's tomb is a story Electra relates to Orestes' messenger (*Electra*, 327–330), perhaps as a means of arousing his anger and hastening his return. What Electra does not realize at this point in the play is that she is already speaking directly with her brother. Cacoyannis, however, turns his audience into witnesses of Aegisthus's victimization of the heroine. In Greek theater violence generally took place off-stage and the audience received a vivid verbal report of it. Cacoyannis's decision to break with this ancient theatrical convention in his trilogy serves to increase sympathy for his heroines.[10] Finally, Orestes kills Aegisthus not at a feast in honor of the nymphs, but at a Bacchic revel over which the usurper presides with great pomp. Electra's charges against him ring true in the film, rendering her more sympathetic by comparison. Aegisthus proves his cowardice and arrogance and, as the prologue demonstrates, he is at heart Clytemnestra's pawn. The queen is also portrayed as an evil and cruel woman who does not care for her surviving children as is revealed by the adroit use of the close-up. In the *agon* (verbal confrontation) with Electra, the camera focuses on her face and eyes, which betray her deceit and thus cause all her excuses to ring hollow.

The Greeks in *The Trojan Women* are clearly the villains oppressing the women. They use physical force to subdue them when necessary as demonstrated in the prologue when they forcibly separate mothers from their children. But perhaps the biggest strike against them in the film is the murder of an innocent boy. Cacoyannis ensures that his viewers witness Astyanax's murder. The camera follows the Greek soldier who leads the small boy to the top of the walls and dizzying camera movements suggest his fall. This is a filmic technique that the director uses throughout the trilogy when he wants to suggest that a terrible crime is taking place. In this scene the spectator is momentarily placed in the position of the young prince glimpsing the rocks through his eyes as he falls to his death. The audience is thus granted access to the off-stage space of Greek tragedy, the aim being to intensify their emotional response to the events they are witnessing. The director's political aim is to rouse the viewers' anger against the cruelty of the Greeks, and more generally against all oppressors.

The captive women have the most contact with Talthybius the Greek messenger, played in the film by Brian Blessed. He is the henchman of the Greek army carrying out their commands. But in the movie he is supported by a number of anonymous soldiers. Their presence serves to intensify the predicament of the women and their helplessness. The only Greek general who puts in an appearance is Menelaus. As portrayed by Patrick Magee in the film, he is a weak man, who proceeds to fall under Helen's spell again. In Cacoyannis's interpretation, Helen is a "magnificent animal"[11] who relies on her sexuality to get her own way. The viewers' first encounter with her colors their perception of the character. She is kept separately from the other prisoners in a hut. In the heat the other women are suffering from intense thirst, but Helen alone succeeds in getting a bowl of water. She strips naked and proceeds to bathe herself, sparking a riot among the other captive women. When we encounter her again during the *agon* with Hecuba she appears richly dressed and bejeweled in sharp contrast to the former queen of Troy and the chorus, who are meanly attired in somber colors.[12] Costuming decisions can thus reinforce characterization. Cacoyannis might stay fairly close to Euripides' words in this scene but he has stacked the chips against Helen in terms of viewer sympathy. Close-ups of her eyes further undermine her credibility as they only serve to reveal her guile. Hecuba is the clear winner of this confrontation, but ultimately she loses. Cacoyannis added a shot of Helen's triumphant expression on the ship that will carry her back to Greece that reinforces the success of her seduction of her ex-husband. Helen's power over men overcomes the justice that Hecuba hopes for.

In *Iphigenia* there is a clear division along gender lines. The male protagonists are portrayed as weak and/or driven by ambition.[13] The army is ruled by its lust for the spoils of war. In contrast the female protagonists enjoy loving and supportive relationships as exemplified in Clytemnestra's love for her daughter. These bonds are destroyed only through male agency. Cacoyannis utilized the close-up particularly effectively in *Iphigenia*. Agamemnon's vacillation and his mental suffering are captured on camera in shots that focus the viewers' attention on his sweating face and anguished eyes. One of the last shots of the prologue draws attention to Agamemnon's frustration and his feelings of impotence by focusing on his hand scratching away at the paint of an amphora. The scenes of Clytemnestra's anguish when she discovers the truth are clearly designed for maximum emotional impact. Iphigenia is portrayed as an innocent young girl sacrificed for petty revenge on the altar of her father's ambition. Cacoyannis resolved Aristotle's charge leveled against *Iphigenia at Aulis* that the tragic heroine's change of heart is an example of inconsistent characterization (*Poetics*, 1454a 31–33) by rationalizing his protagonist's motivation. Iphigenia accepts her fate for love of her

father and Hellas (Bakogianni 2013a: 229–230). Greek soldiers eagerly awaiting her sacrifice surround her father's compound, so her decision to accept her fate bravely is more understandable with the soldiers always in the frame. Clytemnestra, however, refuses to accept the sacrifice of her daughter and her anguish is captured in minute detail by the camera (see Figure 7.2). The audience witness her change of heart as her grief and desperation turns to hatred at the end of the film. In their *agon* she warned Agamemnon that this is precisely what would happen, "If you return I will be waiting, my hatred like a venomous snake." Cacoyannis's aim was to invest Greek tragedy with real emotion that contemporary audiences could understand and respond to.

The theory of the dialectic of montage, formulated by the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein stresses the control that a director can exert over the ideological message of his/her film (Aitken 2001: 132–133). Cacoyannis took every opportunity to stamp his Eurpidean trilogy with his own vision of his source plays. The shots he selected to construct his portraits of his characters reveal his attention to even the minutest details, as do the changes he introduced to the plots of these ancient dramas. Cinematic tools like the close-up form an essential element of his filmic vocabulary. Another key factor in the trilogy's cinematic and ideological language is its use of landscape.

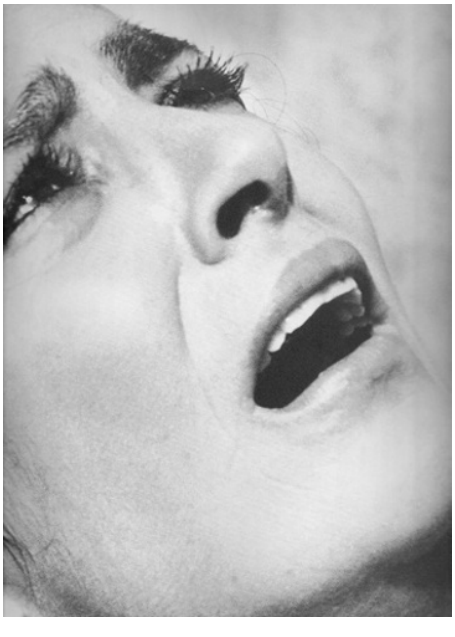

Figure 7.2 A close-up of Clytemnestra's anguish in *Iphigenia* © The Michael Cacoyannis Foundation.

Ruins and Landscapes

Cacoyannis openly acknowledged the key role that landscape plays in his Euripidean trilogy. Talking about *Electra*, he described how "the twisted-up old olive trees, the rocks, the dry earth" are like another character: they are Greece itself distilled and caught on camera (Siafkos 2009: 125). The director chose his locations very carefully. He set the prologue of his *Electra* in the ruins of Mycenae precisely because they lent his cinematic adaptation the required glamor of classical antiquity. The very fact that the monument is in ruins indicates the passing of the centuries and visually connects ancient to modern Greece. The ruins also invest the prologue with authority and despite the chronological discrepancy stand in as a suitably grand locale for the reproduction of Greek tragedy in the cinematic medium. The famous Mycenaean citadel becomes the royal palace of Argos once again in *Iphigenia*.[14] Only in this prequel to *Electra* has the palace not yet been transformed into a dark and dangerous place. It is a happy home from which Clytemnestra and Iphigenia set out on their journey to Aulis. *The Trojan Women* was shot in Spain with a ruined castle standing in as the fallen city of Troy. All three films are therefore visually anchored to a set of ruins that plays a pivotal role in the development of the story, but they are also vital in establishing an atmosphere, an "authentic" air of antiquity.

If ruins provide key focal points in all three movies the countryside dominates the trilogy, since all three films were shot largely in the open instead of on studio sets, as was standard practice in Hollywood during the heyday of sword and sandal epics. In *Electra* the open countryside into which the heroine is thrown when she is given in marriage to the peasant proves a nurturing place in contrast to the claustrophobic palace. Cacoyannis utilizes the landscape particularly effectively in an added scene in which the men and women of the countryside celebrate the rightful killing of Aegisthus. A torch-lit procession brings light to a darkened landscape as Orestes' actions give rise to hopes of freedom (see Figure 7.3). To a classicist this scene is reminiscent of the torch-lit procession that brings Aeschylus's *Eumenides* to its triumphant conclusion. In the play the Furies forsake their anger over Athena's decision to acquit Orestes of his mother's murder and become the kindly ones who join the cults of the *polis* of Athens. The procession in the film also echoes Orthodox Easter celebrations. The lightning of candles at midnight marks the end of the Easter mourning period and the commencement of the celebrations for the Resurrection. Orestes is portrayed as a savior in the film, but the celebrations on this occasion prove premature. The menacing dark sky that hangs over the finale of the film visually represents the return of darkness and suffering.

Figure 7.3 The Greek countryside lit up in *Electra* © The Michael Cacoyannis Foundation.

In *The Trojan Women* and *Iphigenia* the landscape becomes a place of tragic suffering from the outset. Arid and dry, it cannot support the encamped Greek army. In the earlier film the Greeks are shown to be responsible for destroying what little remains of Troy, while in the latter there is a clear demarcation line between the natural world and the Greek camp. The countryside through which Iphigenia travels to Aulis is a tranquil place, but the swarming soldiers have exhausted the resources of the site they occupy. In the opening shots of *Iphigenia* a large crowd is shown languishing on the beach in the heat. Cacoyannis utilized the landscape to build up his characterization of the Greek army and to help explain why they are so ready to accept any means of leaving Aulis behind. There are no safe places in a land occupied by the military in the latter two films. Cassandra utters her prophetic words in a cave, but Talthybius and the Greek soldiers chase her outside and capture her. Iphigenia seeks refuge in the woods, but is also discovered and dragged back by the Greek soldiers. The empty landscape wreathed in smoke at the end of *The Trojan Women* epitomizes the destruction of the natural world wrought by war and violence and Aulis prefigures this in the last film in the trilogy.

Fidelity or Interpretation?

Cacoyannis drew attention to the very process of adaptation by openly acknowledging his debt to Euripidean dramaturgy. The fact that these films are based on Euripides' plays is proclaimed in the end credits of each of the three films. But the director did not stop there. Throughout the making of the films and up until his death, Cacoyannis deliberately invited comparison between the plays and his cinematic adaptations in countless interviews and promotional material. He also became involved in academic discussions of Greek tragedy and film (e.g., Cacoyannis 1984). In the transition from theatrical play to cinematic film, however, an act of interpretation is taking place. What Cacoyannis did was to select one possible reading of the ancient dramas to portray on the silver screen, one among the many possibilities contained within his source texts. The responses of knowledgeable members of the audience are conditioned not only with reference to these ancient plays, but also by any other adaptations that they might have seen in a variety of performative media.

Cacoyannis argued that art has no country and he deliberately avoided drawing parallels between his cinematic adaptations of the ancient Greek dramas and contemporary events in Greece and Cyprus. He preferred to stress the timeless appeal of Greek tragedy (Cacoyannis 1984: 211) and his fidelity to the spirit of Euripides (223–225). But his Euripidean trilogy is very much a product of its time and place. International events such as the war in Vietnam and the rise of the anti-war movement shaped the director's responses. More importantly, however, the Greek and Cypriot historical, political and sociocultural context of the sixties and seventies conditioned Cacoyannis's very understanding of Euripides' dramas. The political and economic instability in Greece during the late fifties and for much of the sixties informs his portrayal of the themes of political power and the burdens of leadership in *Electra* (Bakogianni 2011: 159–161 and 191; Chiasson 2013: 218–221). When the military junta seized control of the country in 1967, Cacoyannis chose self-exile. It is hard not to read *The Trojan Women* with its opposition to all forms of violence and injustice as a response to what was happening in Greece and more generally worldwide in the early seventies. *Iphigenia* further cemented Cacoyannis's anti-war reading of Euripides. The director began work on the last film in his trilogy after finishing his documentary *Attila 74* (1975) about the invasion of his home island of Cyprus (Bakogianni 2013b: 230–232). The maternal grief of Clytemnestra echoes that of the Cypriot mothers whose children had been killed or gone missing. The innocent Iphigenia sacrificed on the altar of irredentist ambitions becomes a potent symbol for Cyprus swept up in the power games played by Greece and Turkey (Bakogianni 2013b: 246).

The anti-war interpretation of Greek tragedy, so popular with practitioners in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is in fact a modern reading. The plays allow for the negative aspects of conflict, pain and suffering to find expression, but what they do not do is to condemn war outright. Making war was a central activity of the *polis* of Athens, particularly in the fifth century BC when drama flourished (Pritchard 2010: 6). Tragedy's deliberate ambiguity leaves room for multiple co-existing interpretations. An anti-war reading of our surviving corpus closes down the plays' interpretative possibilities by enlisting them in the modern fight against conflict and violence. Ancient spectators watching Euripides' plays performed for the first time were more likely to have maintained a greater degree of critical distance than modern viewers of Cacoyannis's trilogy. The director's anti-war spectacles are specifically designed to rouse the viewer's indignation by focusing almost exclusively on the human cost of war. In order to accomplish this aim Cacoyannis eliminated or subsumed all elements in his source texts that do not support this anti-war interpretation of Euripides' dramas.

Greek Cinema and Theater

Cacoyannis's Euripidean trilogy was produced largely independently of the Greek film industry, but it owes a debt to the studio system that gave the Greek-Cypriot director the opportunity to build a body of work upon which his later international success is based. Comedies and melodramas dominated the Greek film industry in the early 1950s (Karalis 2012: 58). Cacoyannis settled in Greece in 1953 hoping to launch his directorial career. His first film was *Windfall in Athens* (1954), a light-hearted comedy that garnered him good reviews. But the film for which he is still best remembered in Greece is his *Stella* (1955), starring Melina Mercouri (1920–94).[15] Quite shockingly for the period the film focuses on low characters that live and work in the poorest parts of the city. It is a modern Greek tragedy which ends with the eponymous protagonist murdered by her lover because she refuses to abide by conventional standards of female behavior and remain faithful to him. Cacoyannis's interest in tragic stories with female protagonists is what drew him to Euripides (McDonald and Winkler 2001: 75). The director's decision to adapt a Greek tragedy for the screen was, however, particularly bold considering the financial failure of George Tzavellas's *Antigone* (1961), another modern Greek film closely modeled on Sophocles' famous tragedy.[16]

What is distinctive about Cacoyannis's reception of Greek tragedy is that he directed these ancient plays not only for the silver screen, but also

for the theater.[17] His cinematic homage to the theatrical roots of his source texts owes much to his experiences as a theatrical director; indeed Cacoyannis did not distinguish between his work in the two media (Cacoyannis 1984: 213). The revival of Greek drama in modern Greek theater was another manifestation of the ideological construction of a Hellenic national identity that stretched all the way back to classical times. An essential element for making the connection explicit in terms of geography was to stage productions of Greek drama in the physical spaces of the surviving ancient theaters. The summer festival at Epidaurus, where Greek drama is regularly performed to this day, is perhaps the best-known and most enduring symbol of the "continuity" argument (Gourgouris 1996: 252–261). By filming in Mycenae and in the Greek countryside, Cacoyannis was asking his audience to buy into this view of Greek history.

Reception

The classical scholar Hugh Lloyd-Jones had high praise for Michael Cacoyannis's *Electra*:

> Cacoyannis has a touch of genius. He has kept the spirit of Euripides' play and put it into film terms. In fact, he may have improved it. (John Ardagh, *The Observer*, April 14, 1963)

But Cacoyannis's decision to create a Euripidean trilogy of cinematic adaptations that drew on both art-house and mainstream cinema proved not to everyone's taste. The label "popular" often carries negative connotations and authorship theory in Film Studies valorizes exceptional directors who set themselves up against Hollywood and its filmic conventions. In contrast to Lloyd-Jones, Katerina Zacharia offers a reductionist reading of Cacoyannis's "popularizing films" (Zacharia 2008: 332). She criticizes the Greek-Cypriot director for promoting the stereotype of a timeless Greece for the dominant American market. She argues that his desire to attract an international audience to his trilogy by utilizing Hollywood techniques is a betrayal of ethnically distinctive cinema (Zacharia 2008: 334–336). Marianne McDonald, on the other hand, is enthusiastic about Cacoyannis's contribution to the adaptation of Greek tragedy in the modern world precisely because his theatrical productions and his trilogy demonstrate the "timeless appeal" of these ancient dramas (2001: 72).

Studio funding (even partial funding) comes with a price. The release of the trilogy on DVD was delayed for many years because Cacoyannis

was unable to reach a deal with United Artists/MGM who held the distribution rights of the films. Fortunately agreement was eventually achieved and the trilogy was finally released on DVD in the early 2000s.[18] This was an important turning point for its wider reception by new audiences and its availability for scholars and for use in the classroom. Cacoyannis's "hybrid" Euripidean trilogy is without doubt an important landmark in the reception of Greek tragedy on film in the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 70s and a testament to the power and audience appeal of modern political interpretations of Euripides' plays. From the point of view of a classicist, however, the films' pedagogical potential is just as important. In today's highly visual culture the trilogy is a key resource for helping students engage more closely with Greek tragedy. Cacoyannis's trilogy is a case study that can be endlessly mined for classics and film courses. *Electra*, *The Trojan Women* and *Iphigenia* allow us to work closely with our students to explore issues of fidelity and adaptation, the commonalities and differences between the theatrical and cinematic mediums and our culture's critical bias against popular culture. The films are a timely reminder that Greek tragedy is not the preserve of the elite in any medium; it deserves every opportunity to attract large audiences in this brave new global world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In memory of Michael Cacoyannis who passed away on July 25, 2011 for his manifest kindness towards a young scholar interested in his work.

Special thanks are due to the Michael Cacoyannis Foundation (http://www.mcf.gr/en/) for permission to reproduce the images that illustrate this chapter. I would also like to thank Arthur J. Pomeroy for his patience and careful editorial work.

NOTES

1. See also Meredith Safran's Chapter 8 in this volume.
2. Cacoyannis repeatedly described the three films as a "Trilogy" (Siafkos 2009: 181–182). See also Karalis 2012: 183. I have also argued consistently that the three films deserve this label because they share several thematic commonalities; for example, see Bakogianni (2013a: 207, n. 3 and 2015: 291, n. 2). Cf. MacKinnon 1986: 75 and Michelakis 2013: 42–43, who express reservations.
3. Cacoyannis managed to secure Hollywood financing for *Electra*. United Artists funded the film thanks to Cacoyannis's friendship with its European representative,

Ilia Lopez (Siafkos 2009: 121). Finos Film, a Greek studio, provided the production facilities. So, even though Cacoyannis enjoyed directorial independence, he also relied on the framework and resources provided by American and Greek studios.

4. For example, he introduced changes that reflect his interpretation of Euripides' source text. In Cacoyannis's view the real reason for the war at Troy was not Helen, but the Greeks' lust for gold. He added a scene in *The Trojan Women* in which a group of soldiers on horseback discuss Helen's fate. They make it clear that she was the pretext they needed to attack Troy.
5. *Electra* won Best Screen Adaptation at the 1962 Cannes Film Festival. It also won the Best Picture award at the Thessaloniki Film Festival and even an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film. *The Trojan Women* and *Iphigenia* were both screened at the Cannes Film Festival, in 1971 and 1977 respectively. *Iphigenia* won Best Movie and Best Actress at the Thessaloniki Film Festival and was nominated for a Golden Palm. In terms of their reception the trilogy has been screened at various film festivals around the world. To give but a few examples: in 1981 at the British National Film Theatre and again in May of 2001 at the Barbican (both in London), earlier in the same month by the *demos* of Athens, and at the 14th Antipodes Greek film festival in 2006 held in Melbourne. The latter occasion testifies to the trilogy's continuing importance as a tool in the Greek diaspora's construction of its Hellenic identity.
6. McDonald used the terms "artificial" and "natural" (1983: 248). See also Michelakis' discussion on the topic of Cacoyannis's use of realism and stylization (2013: 43–51).
7. Cacoyannis has repeatedly gone on record stating his belief that Euripides did not believe in the Olympian gods. I asked this question myself when I first met him in 2001. See also McDonald and Winkler 2001: 79.
8. The dedication is capitalized in the film for maximum effect. Interestingly, the use of the plural in the first part of the dedication "we who have made this film" is an acknowledgement on Cacoyannis's part of the collaborative nature of all film-making.
9. The characters of Calchas and Odysseus are both Cacoyannis's additions to the cast of Euripides' play.
10. For a discussion of the danger that film might show too much, see Michelakis 2013: 24.
11. From an interview with Cacoyannis included among the extras of the Greek DVD of his Euripidean trilogy (AudioVisual Enterprises 2005).
12. A similar contrast is set up between Electra's poor clothes and her mother's rich attire in the scene of the *agon* in *Electra*.
13. The only exception is Cacoyannis's sympathetic reading of Achilles. Euripides created a less than heroic version of the famous Greek Iliadic warrior, but Cacoyannis re-heroized him to turn him into the perfect match for his naively heroic Iphigenia (Bakogianni 2013a: 229). His arrogance is explained away as the natural pride of a young man who believes himself to be the Greeks' best warrior.
14. On the importance of the ruins in *Electra* and *Iphigenia*, see Michelakis 2013: 193–199.

15. For a brief discussion of Cacoyannis's early films, see Bakogianni 2011: 157–158. For further details see Karalis 2012: 67–72.
16. For a discussion of the reasons why Tzavellas's adaptation was not successful, see Bakogianni 2008: 121–122 and 165–166.
17. Of particular interest in terms of his Euripidean trilogy is his 1963 production of Euripides' *Troades* in New York, performed again in Paris two years later. He directed this play once more for the Festival at Epidaurus in 1995 and again in 1997. He also directed *Iphigenia in Aulis* in New York in 1967. He only ever directed Sophocles' *Electra*, at Epidaurus in 1983, but never Euripides' *Electra*.
18. The films were first released on DVD for the American market (*Electra* by MGM in 2002 and *The Trojan Women* by Kino International in 2004). A Greek DVD of the trilogy by Audio Visual Enterprises S.A. became available in 2005.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Greek Tragedy as Theater in Screen-Media

Meredith E. Safran

Of all the ways that Greek tragedy can migrate from the stage and into a proliferating variety of screen-media, perhaps the most controversial is the formal hybrid of the "screen play," in the words of Amanda Wrigley (2012). The perception of these art forms' distinctive qualities and capacities has often driven critical discussion among theorists and practitioners, although the terms of engagement shift with the development of new technology and other expressions of human ingenuity (Knopf 2004; Cardullo 2011). Among screen-media, the poetics and aesthetics of film and television differ from each other, and the effects of personal viewing practices involving ever smaller and more individualized devices may one day be upended by fully immersive virtual reality technology. Until that time, however, viewing a live theatrical performance through a screen often inspires the double consciousness of "you are(n't) there" due to awareness of watching a recording of a live performance, or recognition of the screen as mediator/barrier. The loss of liveness marked by a recording, and the loss of present-ness during live-streaming (a practice increasingly employed by stage companies), remain formidable obstacles to simulating the experience of theater.

Nevertheless, there are benefits to moving stage productions to screens. First, and most directly tied to the character of live performance, is the ability to create a record of a significant cultural event that transcends the ephemeral nature of drama, dance and opera. However, when the recording does not take place in a theatrical performance space before a live audience, more

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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pressure falls upon the poetics of the recording technology to compensate for changes to the performance matrix. Second, a screen-medium may better serve the extra-artistic purposes of the producers or sponsors. Prior to the rise of the internet, television's deep penetration into the home and a society's popular consciousness positioned it well for transmitting ideological messages, especially when coupled with the cultural authority of classical drama as elite art form. Third, the filming of performance can act as a kind of witnessing for the ongoing debate over how to value "Greek tragedy" and its canonical texts.

Given the multivalence of "Greek tragedy" (Michelakis 2013), one test-case—Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*—will serve as the focal point for exploring the incentives for and uses of viewing a live theatrical production of Greek tragedy on screen. The deference long paid to this tragedy due to its elevation by Aristotle has resulted in myriad engagements on stage and screen that have been treated by, for example, Burian (1997), McDonald (2007) and Winkler (2009). While the continuous return to a work so freighted with cultural meaning can be viewed as essentially conservative, artists also have capitalized upon the tragedy's prestige to refract various concerns in both earnest and satirical interpretations, thereby demonstrating the tragedy's recurring relevance within contemporary discussions. Frequently, screen versions are better understood through consideration of the performance history of Greek tragedy on the modern stage (Hall and Macintosh 2005; Macintosh 2009; Foley 2012). How and why live theatrical productions of *Oedipus Tyrannus* (or *Rex*, per the Latinate tradition) become screen texts is the focus of this chapter. For purposes of coherence, the examples are all drawn from Canada, the United States and Great Britain, whose shared language and close-knit cultural history enabled a high degree of artistic interchange.

Theatrical Document and/or Screen Art

In 1927, Costas and Dimitris Gaziadas directed the first film of a live theatrical performance of Greek tragedy: select scenes from Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, filmed from a variety of camera positions and angles on location at the theater in the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. However, the film's primary value has been as a record of this live performance at Eva Palmer-Sikelianos's Delphic cultural festival (MacKinnon 1986: 43–48). When a film is made to create a document for performance history, can it also earn recognition as a work of cinematic art? Four films that record culturally momentous live productions permit exploration of this dual identity: Tyrone Guthrie's 1957 film of his stage production of *Oedipus Rex* at the Stratford Shakespearean

Festival (1954–55); Alexander Hammid's 1960 film of Martha Graham's 1947 response to Sophocles' tragedy, *Night Journey*; Julie Taymor's film of her 1992 production of Igor Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* at the Saito Kinen Festival; and Peter Maniura and Jonathan Moore's 1990 video production of Mark-Anthony Turnage's 1988 opera *Greek*, itself based on Steven Berkoff's 1980 play by the same name. These four screen-texts present a range of ways to engage the problem of integrating the theatrical and the cinematic in works that aspire to be both document and art.

Tyrone Guthrie's 1957 film, the first of a Greek tragedy to receive commercial distribution, portrays "the last major twentieth-century *Oedipus Tyrannus*" on stage (Macintosh 2009: 163). The film preserves the British director's polemic against the dominant trend in staging Sophocles' play: naturalism. In 1945, Guthrie had declined to direct such a production starring Laurence Olivier at the Old Vic Theatre in London. Instead, he mounted anti-realistic productions as a guest director in Tel Aviv and Helsinki before being invited to direct a new festival in Stratford, Ontario (Guthrie 1960: 233–280). He staged *Oedipus* in Stratford's 1954 season; its success spurred a revival in 1955 (Davies 1954; Davies 1955). Guthrie associated theater with ritual, the Athenian Dionysia with cross-cultural community-wide spring festivals and *Oedipus* specifically with the symbolic re-enactment of human sacrifice to purify and renew the community (Guthrie 1965a; 1965b). His production included a full chorus and the use of full-head masks for all of the performers, to amplify the ritual ambience of the production (Guthrie and Moiseiwitsch 1955). Such concepts had been percolating through theatrical communities in Europe and Britain for over a generation, in connection with the aesthetic and philosophical commitment to reviving ancient Greek culture (Sheppard 2001: 42–51; Csapo and Miller 2008). After the success of the stage productions, Guthrie formed a company with his friend Leonid (Lola) Kipnis to produce films of the Festival's productions. *Oedipus Rex* was the first and, apparently, the last (Forsyth 1976: 257).

Guthrie's biographer James Forsyth describes the film as a "record of the play and the stage production" (1976: 257). Guthrie's directorial preference for placing the camera at medium close-up range allows the viewer excellent access to the actors' voluminous robes, specially made masks and expressive prosthetic hands, otherwise accessible only in photographs or drawings. Moreover, at the insistence of blacklisted Hollywood film-maker Abraham Polonsky, whom Kipnis engaged as an uncredited consultant, the film was shot in color (Buhle and Wagner 2001: 178). Thus the film captures the vivid metallic design of the royal characters and the humble earth tones of the chorus, whose lowly status is conveyed also by their bent postures, compared to the principals elevated on cothurni.

As a record of the Stratford production, however, shooting conditions limited the film's value. Guthrie and Kipnis planned to film at Stratford in the cavernous tent that served as the theater for the first seasons of the new festival, but the film's credits indicate that shooting occurred at a studio in Toronto. This change challenged both Guthrie, an inexperienced film director whom Polonsky had to convince to pick the shots, rather than the cameraman or editor (Buhle and Wagner 2001: 179), and his company, who were removed from production designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch's distinctive stage and the tent's ambience. Blocking, pacing, lighting, sound design and the actors' performances had all been calibrated accordingly. Also missing was the live audience, whom Guthrie conceptualized as witnesses participating in the community ritual unfolding before them.

Although a modified version of Moiseiwitsch's stage was constructed in the studio, the available performance space seems small and Guthrie's framing of the stage action often feels cramped, especially as concerns the chorus (see Figure 8.1). Their continuous presence challenges Guthrie's ability to reconcile theatrical blocking with cinematic direction, and their lumpy, crouching bodies frequently defy visual comprehension, except when Guthrie cuts to a high-angle shot. His camerawork generally denies the full view of the stage, the context in which the integration of mask and body movement

Figure 8.1 Chorus in Guthrie's *Oedipus* (1957) overwhelms the frame.

should be appreciated (Wiles 2005; Varakis 2011). Similarly, sustained proximity to the masks dulls their effectiveness, as Guthrie's camera forces constant confrontation with an unchanging expression often incompatible with the actor's voice or ineffective during "reaction" shots (*pace* Winkler 2002). At close range, not only Tiresias but all characters appear blind, as the masks have black holes where the eyes should be.

A special segment between the opening credits and the play suggests that Guthrie hoped the movie's audience would experience this film as more than a record. From across the dimly-lit stage, an actor in costume but without his mask walks straight toward the camera and instructs the audience on Guthrie's historical-anthropological interpretation of the play. He draws an analogy between a priest's re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice with his congregation through the Eucharist and these actors' re-enactment of Oedipus's sacrifice on stage for the audience. Rather than ignore the mediation of the film-making equipment, he asks the movie's audience to play along: "imagine that these lamps are the sun, that these cameras are watching eyes." Indeed, some of the most effective sequences in the movie, such as a low-angle extreme close-up of Oedipus's mask during his interrogation of the shepherd and the chorus's ode to Cithaeron, involve characters on screen appearing to look straight at those "watching eyes."

The film of *Oedipus Rex* allows examination of a landmark theatrical production at close range. Its ability to act as a record of the production is limited, however, by the movement from the Stratford tent-theater to the differently configured sound stage where the movie was shot, and by the lack of a live audience, so crucial both to Guthrie's concept of theater and to the performers' dynamism and focus. Compounding these challenges was Guthrie's inexperience as a film director, which undermines the effectiveness of *Oedipus Rex* as a work of cinematic art even as the groundbreaking commercial distribution of the film made Guthrie's theatrical concepts accessible beyond the stage production's limited run.

Developing simultaneously with Guthrie's interpretation of Sophocles' tragedy, Martha Graham's 1947 dance-theater piece *Night Journey* was recognized as a landmark work by the time of its filming in 1960. Modern dance's distinctively American interest in the revival of ancient Greek dance forms and openness to non-Western performance traditions contributed to Graham's unique approach (Siegel 1979). Graham herself attributed the power and authority of her work to the Jungian concept of "blood memory" through which she could access past experiences and connect the personal to the universal (Graham 1991). Her connections with Sarah Lawrence College colleague Joseph Campbell, Jungian analyst Frances Wickes and sometime-husband Erick Hawkins, who had been trained in Classics at Harvard,

influenced Graham's wide-ranging interests in myth, varieties of literary psychoanalysis and Greek tragedy (Stodelle 1984; Burt 1998; Yaari 2003; Bannerman 2010; Zajko 2010). Her reinterpretations of canonical classical literary narratives feature strong, complex female characters driven to extremes, including Medea, Clytemnestra, Phaedra and Hecuba.

Night Journey dramatizes an event only reported in Sophocles' play: Jocasta's suicide. Set between her contemplation of the noose and her death, the action consists largely of Jocasta reliving her relationship with Oedipus at the behest of Tiresias, who intervenes in the present and during the flashback. Throughout her passion, Jocasta is accompanied by a chorus of "Daughters of the Night," furies who combine memory and terror (Graham 1991: 213); their leader alternately mirrors, defends and warns Jocasta as she re-enacts fateful events. The piece incorporates viscerally sexual choreography and symbols: in addition to Graham's "vaginal contractions," stylized laurel branches represent both male conquest and female sexuality; Tiresias's phallic staff embodies fate's patriarchal authority; and the rope serves as noose, umbilical cord and the concretization of erotic entanglement (Siegel 1979: 202–209; Graham 1991: 212–216). Isamu Noguchi's set design reinforces these themes, particularly the abstract bed composed of a phallic bone on its left side yoked to abstract female genitalia at right. While more response to than enactment of Sophocles' tragedy, *Night Journey* employs Aristotelian peripeteia and anagnorisis in shaping the plot and culminates in catharsis. This re-enactment allows Jocasta to purge her torment, signaled by shedding her heavy dress to reveal a light sheath, before strangling herself (Bannerman 2010: 270–271).

The driving force behind the 1960 filming of *Night Journey* was Nathan Kroll, who had produced the Peabody Award-winning documentary about Graham's process and her company, *A Dancer's World* (1957), and the film of Graham's signature Americana piece *Appalachian Spring* (1958). Funding was provided by Graham's friend Bethsabee de Rothschild, heir to the European banking family. The intended reception context for these films was educational public broadcasting, which consisted of individual channels scattered among local markets prior to the founding of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in 1969. Like other live performance forms, dance is ephemeral and notoriously difficult to film, but recording Graham's work was also a matter of time. At 67 years old, her physical abilities lagged behind her compelling stage presence even as she resisted relinquishing roles with which she so closely identified (Tracy 1997: *passim*). The role of Oedipus had been originated by Hawkins, but upon his leaving Graham and her company Graham reassigned it to Bertram Ross, who performed the role less cruelly (De Mille 1991; Tracy 1997). The film records *Night Journey* at this later stage of its development and after a decline in Graham's physical abilities.

Night Journey (1960) transcends its status as record through the talent of the film-making team and the change of medium, including its studio setting. Director

Alexander Hammid, an experienced documentarian and avant-garde film-maker, understood how to translate the flow, pace and dynamics of *Night Journey* onto the screen. He typically waits for the character dominating the moment to reach the center of the frame and then follows the action with the camera. In addition to facilitating the viewer's involvement with a character and ability to follow a dance phrase continuously, such containment of the dancer by the camera works thematically for the piece, which takes place inside Jocasta's bedchamber and memory. The move to a bounded studio space, compounded by the camera's limiting of space through framing, emphasizes the claustrophobic atmosphere.

Hammid and editor Miriam Arsham shape the viewer's engagement with the action in a way unavailable to a live audience. Shots average around thirty seconds before the next cut, but can run as long as two minutes or as short as three seconds, as when Arsham constructs a conversation between Oedipus and Jocasta during their courtship. In this sequence Hammid's camera position facilitates access to characters' points of view and acts as voyeur: just behind Jocasta's shoulder in the downstage right corner of the frame as she watches Oedipus perform for her upstage left, then later the reverse, emphasizing the space between them (see Figure 8.2). Hammid captures the choreographic patterns of the chorus, even when he cannot fit all of the dancers in frame, and his depth of focus allows him to encompass downstage and upstage

Figure 8.2 *Night Journey* (1961): camera shot from over the shoulder distances characters.

action simultaneously. In the final shot, Tiresias in his swirling robe sweeps past Jocasta's lifeless body, moving diagonally toward the camera and out of the frame: the representative of fate's inexorable advance. The on-screen image of the seer disappears more completely than the live dancer, whom the audience knows to be off stage in the continuous space of the theater.

Hammid, Arsham and the other members of their team created a film that both recorded *Night Journey* and, through the camera's mediation, stimulated a distinctive engagement with the performance compared to the perspectives available to members of a theatrical audience. Such effective integration of the dance performance with the screen-medium contributed to Graham's reputation, and the suite of films commissioned by Kroll has been released on DVD as part of the prestigious Criterion Collection (2007). Thus Graham's engagement with Sophocles' *Oedipus* entered a developing film canon side-by-side with her company's ongoing performance of the work in repertory.

Julie Taymor effected the metamorphosis of Igor Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex* into a screen-text by transforming the narrator, a key element of her stage production, at the Saito Kinen Festival in Matsumoto, Japan, into a bridge between the theatrical and cinematic experiences. Stravinsky had wrought his own changes upon Sophocles' drama, including the removal of "doing things," by prescribing a frontal, presentational style of performance without interaction among the characters. To create the libretto, Stravinsky further reduced Jean Cocteau's rewrite of Sophocles' text, then had the libretto translated into Church Latin. He wished to draw upon the elevated tone that he associated with Christianity and the Church's ambience of ritual, which he and Cocteau underlined by masking the actors. He also wished to render the libretto incomprehensible to audiences in order to privilege the sound effects of language over meaning (McDonald 2001; Sheppard 2001). In fact, he chose Sophocles' tragedy because its renown relieved him of having to convey story, and he later regretted Cocteau's addition of a narrator who addressed the audience in between scenes.

Producer Peter Gelb engaged Taymor as an outsider to opera, and she fulfilled expectations by incorporating Eastern performance traditions into her staging of the Western work (Blumenthal and Taymor 1995: 38–41 and 158–169). The narrator delivered Cocteau's text in Japanese, in the precise and severe Noh style. A hundred singers and the dancers were painted and costumed in the avant-garde Butoh style, presenting the plague-sufferers as similar to Hiroshima victims. The principals wore larger-than-life masks modeled on Cycladic statues as headpieces and large prosthetic hands, reminiscent of Tyrone Guthrie's production. With her South Asian-influenced

puppetry, Taymor created a third level of action for dramatizing crucial flashbacks like the meeting at the crossroads, including with a life-sized "puppet" Oedipus played by Butoh dancer Min Tanaka. The multivalent use of a thick red ribbon in these sequences as umbilical cord and the fateful crossroads recalls the rope in Martha Graham's own Noh-influenced rendition of the tragedy. Since Taymor used film, which shows greater depth than videotape could at the time, such multiple layers of stage action were captured without loss of visual clarity.

Taymor's filming schedule, which consisted of the two live performances (using four cameras at three levels of distance from the stage) with one day of additional filming for tracking and crane shots, permitted her more angles and degrees of proximity to the performances and production design than the live audience enjoyed (Taymor 2005). Among various filmic techniques, including effects like dissolves and zooming to extreme close-ups, Taymor employs the narrator to the viewer's advantage by directing that character to speak straight into the camera's lens. After the credits, the lens opens on the narrator's face in black and white. It fills the frame as she introduces the proceedings in a sustained close-up. After a few minutes, the camera pulls back to reveal the narrator in color and on stage, about to rip the curtain open and cue the opera. Despite the initial strangeness of hearing Japanese, and in Noh style, the narrator's recurrence stabilizes the viewer's relationship to the performance because the narrator, not the camera, both holds the theatrical production at arm's length and creates a connection directly with the audience. Consequently, even though her appearance ruptures the stage action and she introduces a separate register of action even when she walks among the other performers, the narrator is both authorized and central to the cinematic experience of the stage production. This conceit reshapes the experience of watching the theatrical performance through a screen by acknowledging the disconnect between stage and viewer and then bridging it, as Cocteau intended.

Taymor's production has received varied distribution beyond its live performance at the Saito Kinen Festival. The film of *Oedipus Rex* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 1993, was broadcast on the PBS arts series *Great Performances* and overseas, and was released on DVD. In the kind of technological development that resets the terms of engagement between art and audience, the delivery mechanism of the DVD offers the option of adding subtitles, leaving the viewer to decide whether or not to respect Stravinsky's intentions.

Testing the limits of how much a stage presentation can be renovated for filming and still represent a theatrical production on screen is Peter Maniura's

video of Jonathan Moore's staging of Mark-Anthony Turnage's opera *Greek*, adapted from Steven Berkoff's play of the same name. Steven Berkoff has long cultivated a reputation as a "bad boy" and outsider in the British theater world through his visceral, working-class original plays and adaptations of classic drama (Macintosh 2009). Turnage's opera pares down Berkoff's *Greek*, which resituated the tragedy in London's present-day East End, with a working-class Eddy as the narrator and star of his life's drama (Ewans 2007). After his father's fear of a fortune-teller's forecast pushes Eddy out of his home, he runs the gantlet of Britain's "plague" of social ills. A mortal fight with a déclassé café's owner leads Eddy to marry the proprietor's widow and turn the café into an upscale establishment. Having achieved bourgeois respectability, he learns the truth: his parents merely discovered him as a toddler after a pleasure-boat accident, and the mother who thought he died that day is now his wife. Rather than emulate his namesake, Berkoff's Eddy repudiates traditional morality and embraces his love for his wife–mother, refusing to criminalize or repress it. Mark-Anthony Turnage—like Berkoff, from London's East End and not deferential to the traditions of his art form—scored his opera with a postmodern mélange of influences from Stravinsky and Britten to jazz and football anthems. After premiering at the 1988 Munich Biennale and triumphing at the Edinburgh Festival, the opera's success recommended production of a videotaped version for the BBC in 1990.

Compared to the examples treated above, Maniura's video production is less a record of the stage production than a reinterpretation designed for television. Instead of shooting on the stage set, Maniura and theatrical director Moore rebuilt each setting in an abandoned warehouse to facilitate additional potential shooting angles (Malisch 1990). None of these sets appears so large that it couldn't fit on a theatrical stage, however. Rather than cultivating the realism frequently associated with the cinematic *mise-en-scène*, the shooting sets preserve the artificial, representational appearance of a theatrical environment. This non-realistic aesthetic is redoubled by the flat, shiny image quality that videotape of the time produced, and by the fact that all the characters are played by the same four singers. The occasional surrealism induced by this realization is reinforced by the frequent close-ups that are characteristic of direction for television. Maniura further engages in the surreal fragmentation of lips, hands and feet in heavily edited montages accompanying songs of concentrated violence and sexuality, as when Eddy is caught in an oppressive police action or his wife begins to act out her reminiscences of the couple's erotic activities. Other visual effects include the use of double-exposure during recollections of the accident by Eddy's wife and adoptive father, and a powerful smash cut that elides Eddy's shooting of the Sphinx by replacing the explosion expected from the gun's barrel with the pop of reporters' flashbulbs as they burnish his heroic reputation.

The only explicitly theatrical sequence in this video production of *Greek* is both freighted with class politics and overtly indebted to the Sophoclean values that Berkoff and Turnage rejected. As Eddy's Dad and Mum sit in their kitchen wondering if they did right in pressing their son to leave home as "the plague" assails Thatcher's Britain, they suddenly rise and a cut reveals them to be standing before the footlights on a vaudeville stage. They act out their self-defense in a demotic Cockney song-and-dance routine that culminates in Dad's direct address to the camera: "we play the roles that fate has dealt us." The video's privileging of new media poetics to contain and frame old theatrical ones reflects Berkoff and Turnage's rejection of the conservative message encoded in the dramatic text, in favor of a revolutionary repudiation of both Sophocles and Freud.

Ironically, thirty years later Berkoff would return to Sophocles' tragedy and produce an adaptation far more faithful to the ancient play's plotting, characterization and foregrounding of the chorus, albeit transposed into iambic pentameter using Berkoff's own vernacular and incorporating his own preoccupations. A video of 2011's *Oedipus by Steven Berkoff (after Sophocles)* recorded at the Nottingham Playhouse offers comparison not only with Berkoff's earlier take on the play, but also an aesthetic as opposed to Maniura's as possible. The video produced by Team Media and screened on the British Sky Arts Channel embraces the theatrical experience, including awareness of the live audience watching the play unfold and even at times vocally reacting to its developments.

Hybrid by Design, Televised Live

Distinct from recorded theatrical productions, the first films designed to bring Greek tragedy to the screen date from 1908 to 1913, when at least six movies based on Sophocles' *Oedipus* were produced across Europe. In addition to adapting a theatrical text, surviving stills from *La Légende d'Oedipe* (1913) exhibit marked theatricality in shot composition, as Pantelis Michelakis (2013) has demonstrated. So too critics in the 1930s and 1940s derided the actor's performance, which can be seen in one remaining clip of Oedipus bemoaning his fate after blinding himself, as too theatrical: mouthing all his lines, in a silent film! That actor, Jean Mounet-Sully, had for decades delivered the definitive portrayal of the Greek tragic hero at the Comédie-Française, and was Olivier's forerunner in representation of the tragic hero as Everyman. In part, such criticism reflects the early, frequent and common hybridity of theater and film (Brewster and Jacobs 1997; Knopf 2004; Cardullo 2011). That relationship changed as film developed its own poetics, including by colonizing theater to cinematic ends.

In television's formative days, around the Second World War, hybrid stage/screen programs were also common. The limitations imposed by early technology, whereby programs were broadcast live, were mitigated in the United States by capitalizing upon the studios' New York location, which offered talent trained to perform live and plays already staged for Broadway (Hawes 2001). In Britain, the BBC made similar choices, to a lesser degree (Taylor 1998). Once that technological corner had been turned, the choice to broadcast live theater on television could invoke the medium's "Golden Age." This section treats two examples of live theatrical productions of *Oedipus* designed expressly for television broadcast: on the American weekly arts and culture program *Omnibus* in 1957, and as part of the multi-night presentation of *The Theban Plays* on BBC2 in 1986. In each case, the medium of television was perceived as a fitting vehicle for the textual and para-textual messages assigned to *Oedipus*, although the differences between American and British broadcasting cultures colored the respective presentations.

Tucked among glossy color advertisements for appliances, cars and the miracle of rayon clothing, the full-page black-and-white item "The Blind King Has Two Faces" in the January 21, 1957 issue of *Life* magazine grouped Tyrone Guthrie's movie with a recent live broadcast of Sophocles' tragedy on *Omnibus*, an American television program (Staff 1957). This print layout mirrors the identity of *Omnibus* on air: a prestigious curiosity among commercial programs. *Omnibus* was produced by the Television-Radio Workshop, headed by "television's first great impresario" Robert Saudek (Thomas 1997). Saudek felt that culture was for everyone, and that many things were "culture": ballet and Javanese dance, Grandma Moses' art and Jacques Cousteau's first underwater films. Every Sunday evening from 1952 to 1959 on ABC, then CBS, *Omnibus* brought Saudek's vision into living rooms across the United States.

As British journalist and host Alistair Cooke remarked, *Omnibus* was watched by people "on the prairies and in the suburbs" (McCarthy 2013: 122). Some critics called it "middlebrow," but that self-improving, socially responsible spirit was what philanthropic sponsor the Ford Foundation wanted to cultivate. The Foundation's Cold War liberals, concerned with the moral formation of citizens appropriate to America's new position as world leader, sought to use television's reach to exert a salutary influence on the populace through educational and cultural programming. The board's business leaders hoped to convince the federal government that commercial networks were capable of providing high-quality programming, thereby averting the reservation of channels for non-profit organizations. To fund *Omnibus*, Ford partnered with corporate sponsors who also contributed "educational films."

As a venerable Western art form, live theater played a prominent role in *Omnibus*'s programming (Rose 1986; Hawes 2001). While the roster included such modern classics as Peter Brook's condensed *Henry V* starring Orson Welles, like other network programs that still broadcast live theater in the 1950s *Omnibus* began commissioning original plays scripted for television, by playwrights from Maxwell Anderson to Tennessee Williams. By the late 1950s, the industry was adjusting to new recording technology, color and the move to Hollywood, where filmed serials were made more cheaply. In 1957, *Oedipus* might have appeared old-fashioned: one of the oldest plays in the Western tradition, performed live on one studio set, broadcast live in black-and-white, and made in New York. Although Saudek's papers (archived at Wesleyan University) show that the production included four of Guthrie's Stratford *Oedipus* players, used Stratford props for the production staff's reference and starred Christopher Plummer, who had recently performed at Stratford, stage director Alan Schneider opted for mainstream naturalism.

Still, the antiquity and prestige of Greek tragedy were perhaps perceived as potentially alienating to the Foundation's target audience. In an Associated Press article published in the Toledo, Ohio *Blade*, Saudek emphasizes the universality and relatability of Sophocles' story. Journalist Charles Mercer aims high by invoking Aristotle's judgment ("the masterpiece of the Greek theater") and shoots for the middle by proclaiming the *Omnibus* production neither a "modern, corned-up version" nor like "those tedious college interpretations." He concludes with a low blow, by stoking middlebrow fears of inadequacy: "Almost invariably those who hold their heads at the mention of Greek tragedy know nothing about it. They should take a look next Sunday and make up their own minds" (Mercer 1957).

Alistair Cooke's introduction to the episode notes the play's longevity, its appeal to artists and Freud's invocation of the story, but ultimately justifies interest in a "rather barbaric Greek king who committed a monstrous crime" thus: "In all literature, it is the most poignant and terrifying warning to powerful men anywhere … not to mistake themselves for gods." This warning to vainglorious strongmen, recalling the rhetorical function of the tyrant in democratic Athens, suits an audience familiar with Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, and now Khrushchev and Mao. Cooke impresses upon viewers that the ancient Athenians derived moral instruction from the stage, to which "the entire people [*sic*]" were privy. Yet only a fraction of the American people—*Omnibus*'s self-improving viewers—would receive the play's warning about "the sin of pride." (Without irony, a message from sponsor Aluminium Limited trumpets the man-made achievement of firefighters withstanding 1000-degree temperatures with the help of aluminum manufactured by Man's harnessing of the raging rivers of the Canadian wilderness.)

Complicating those ideological directives, television director Seymour Robbie dramatizes the tyrant's seductive appeal through television's propensity to elevate images through close-ups, before bearing witness to his downfall. Plummer's announced status as "Broadway star" trades on this magnetism and close-ups adore his face throughout the broadcast, while an extremely short peplum exposes his muscular legs for visual consumption. Plummer's tightly wound but debonair statesmanship in the opening scene gives way to a rousing demagogic performance before the people. But this intensity turns violent against Tiresias, whom he taunts by cruelly circling, throttling, and finally flinging to the ground. Oedipus's paranoid tantrum against Creon abates as he lays his childlike head in Jocasta's lap; his tyrannical madness becomes maniacal glee when remembering the murders he committed, and resurfaces in his unseemly quick joy at hearing about the death of the man he believes to be his father. Still, the restraint with which Plummer's Oedipus receives the full truth, witnessed through an extended extreme close-up, earns him pity. As the remaining copy of the episode is damaged, the last scene of the play, including the image featured in *Life*, is lost.

The other ideologically significant player, the chorus, reacts to the tyrant's degeneration. These men and women are regular townspeople who speak in turns and together, like a civic congregation. Faith in their leader is tempered by reverence for their god; frequently they gather downstage left for prayer by a giant primitive stone head representing Zeus, in contrast to Jocasta's strident defiance and Oedipus's readiness to follow her. Although Cooke's introduction and consultant Walter Kerr's notes cite religion as the key area of difference for the audience, in this allegory a pagan divine patriarch was sufficient to humble the "barbaric" potentate. By 1957, assertions of generic religious piety in contradistinction to atheistic Communism had already resulted in US President Dwight D. Eisenhower authorizing the addition of "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance, and "In God We Trust" was about to start appearing on American paper money. Although the chorus's civic identity comes into focus through a beautifully blocked and filmed group deliberation in the space before the palace after Oedipus withdraws in disgrace, their pious reliance upon Zeus is justified by the play's validation of his order.

Whether *Oedipus* fulfilled the Ford Foundation's ideological goals, *Time* reviewed it favorably, and availability on kinescope extended its life after live broadcast through local viewings around the country. Robert Saudek's correspondence includes a professor from Notre Dame asking to borrow a kinescope for viewing on campus and Saudek's well-received offer of a loan to one St. Joseph's Seminary. But *Omnibus* exhibited no particular taste for Greek tragedy; the only other broadcast was *Antigone*, in 1954. *Oedipus*

aired at the end of an era, as Ford detached itself from Saudek's company in late 1957 (Hawes 2001; McCarthy 2013). While Plummer would play Oedipus again in Peter Saville's 1968 film, within two years *Omnibus* was a casualty of the commercial environment, as theater televised live from New York yielded to pre-recorded series made in Hollywood.

A generation later and across the Atlantic, Don Taylor's three-night broadcast of *The Theban Plays* on BBC2 in 1986 recalled a Golden Age of British television, when live theatrical programming embodied the BBC's mission of providing public access to cultural heritage. Since the mid-1950s, when breaking up the Corporation's monopoly admitted new commercial networks to the airwaves, the single-play broadcast had lost ground to the popularity of series and serials (Taylor 1998). Through the 1960s and into the 1970s, the BBC's single-play programming strands had become closely identified with "kitchen sink" realism that challenged the viewing public, rather than comfortable, prestigious drama (Eigner 1979; Macmurraugh-Kavanagh 2002). This trend favored the original play written for television, depicting social problems and focused on the working class. Such decisions ran athwart of the BBC board of governors' desire for popular, unprovocative and cost-efficient productions that could compete with commercial networks unburdened by the Reithian public service tradition.

As the Thatcher government increased pressure and scrutiny on BBC budgets in the 1980s (O'Malley 1994), Taylor's pet project *The Theban Plays* fit some of the key, if conflicting, preoccupations surrounding BBC television programming. The literary trilogy of *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone* comprised undisputed classics—although the Lord Chamberlain Office's ban on *Oedipus* due to its incest theme had also made it a cause *celèbre* for opponents of government censorship in the early twentieth century (Macintosh 2009: 113–123). The BBC television play, to which Taylor had contributed in the Drama and the Arts divisions, was closely identified with the Golden Age of British television (Wake 2010). Although Taylor had opposed the particular brand of realism encouraged during Canadian Sidney Newman's tenure as Head of Drama in the 1960s, he too desired to bring relevant social issues into the British living room. Both as a working-class Londoner with socialist commitments and an Oxford-educated culture-maker, Taylor believed in Sophocles' plays as art and wanted Greek tragedy to appeal to the masses, in line with the BBC's public service ideals.

In an interview with *Radio Times*, Taylor announced his ambition to "make the works of Sophocles available to my own people, my own class" on "the whole nation's medium—television" (Crace 1986). He connected the imperatives of "Golden Age" 1960s programming ("demanding, intellectual and attractive for the masses") to the conditions of ancient Greek drama.

Where Tyrone Guthrie saw ceremonial aesthetic and ritual participation by the audience, Taylor envisioned Athenians receiving a state subsidy to witness worthy theater: a proto-BBC. He wished "to liberate … great drama … from the preserve of the ruling or moneyed cliques and from the theatrical impresarios who count all Greek drama as box-office death." This liberation extended to Taylor adapting existing translations into his own English dramatic verse, to create a performable modern idiom for his ideal audience.

To further prime the audience, the preceding broadcast of "Speaking to the City: Sophocles Then and Now" featured actors from Taylor's three productions discussing the plays (treated in Wrigley 2012). Anthony Quayle (Oedipus in *Colonus*) voices the knee-jerk distaste that viewers might feel for Greek tragedy, which he discredits from his own experience: "I had been crassly prejudiced against even reading Sophocles all my life … [I]f people could overcome the sort of idiot prejudice I had … I can't believe they won't be totally hooked." Juliet Stevenson, who played Antigone, demonstrated that play's relevance by relating the tragic heroine to a civil servant who had leaked government information to the *Guardian* out of duty to the people. To address the formal element most likely to alienate the audience, Taylor introduced the chorus by analyzing an excerpt from *Oedipus the King*.

Taylor's ambition can be measured by the production's sheer monumentality. The cavernous playing space is dominated by two giant black structures: a triangular edifice reminiscent of the Mycenae Lion Gate at stage left and a marble palace atop a three-sided set of stairs on stage right. Taylor's blocking exploits the imposing staircase that literalizes the social height from which Oedipus, and also Jocasta, will experience a precipitous descent. His expertise with camera positioning for live televised theater amplifies the levels and depths offered by the set. The score, which propels the wordless opening action and recurs throughout the play, is heavy and obtrusive, featuring mournful brass and woodwinds, and choral keening. Playing the lead roles are highly regarded, well-known Shakespearean actors Michael Pennington, Claire Bloom, John Shrapnel and Sir John Gielgud, their identities emphasized by television's propensity for close-ups.

Since this particular "great man" drama entails an intimate link with the public good, Taylor could logically foreground "the people" as participants. The first four minutes of the broadcast consist of filling center stage's expansive public square with an assembly of the miserable: working-class men, women and children whose costuming suggests the timelessness of the play through a mixture of medieval, Victorian and Second World War-era garb. These plague-sufferers serve as both audience and backdrop for Oedipus's triumphant entrance and "man of the people" speech; the chorus of Elders point to them in the next scene as reminders of the Elders' responsibility to

restore justice and health to the city. Dressed in black robes and lace jabots, these elderly men convey orderliness and conservatism, but not necessarily effectiveness in guarding the state's well-being. Sartorial elegance indicates corruption in this production: Oedipus's trim white suit, Jocasta's graceful gowns, even the dapper outfit of the elderly man from Corinth as a social-climbing dandy hoping to curry favor. Contrast the noble Theban shepherd in his fraying leather coat and cap, boots and a faded neckerchief, who projects forbearance and quiet dignity before his unraveling king. As the blinded Oedipus laments his fate, the wretched citizens gather once more: this time with torches. But they are no mob. Their collective witnessing supports Taylor's socialist politics—and highlights Creon's incipient tyranny as he rebukes them for doing so.

In both American and British productions, live-ness joined theater and television in a symbiotic hybridity. The medium of television, like the text of *Oedipus*, was determined by its producers to be fitting for broadcasting their politics, which framed rather than deformed the artistic projects. As with the *Omnibus* production of *Oedipus*, Taylor's production of *The Theban Plays* marked the beginning of the end of an era. His *Oedipus* received fine reviews and was distributed outside of the UK through a BBC partnership with Films for the Humanities. But of numerous planned Greek tragedies, Taylor was able to mount only one: *Iphigenia in Aulis* in 1990. Since then, no Greek tragedies have appeared on British television. The larger scope and social meaning of classical antiquity on British broadcasting, especially Greek tragedy, will be comprehensively treated in forthcoming work by Amanda Wrigley.

Cinematic Ends for Stage Performance

By the middle of the twentieth century, film had established its dominance over theater both economically and in terms of cultural impact. But it hadn't left association with theater behind; indeed, in Hollywood one of the foremost genres of the 1930s to 1950s was the musical comedy, a good number of which involve staging a theatrical show on screen. Generally, the show-within-the-show is thematically connected to the cinematic framing narrative, which typically involves a central romance. One of the genre's foremost entries, *The Band Wagon* (1953), complicates this conceit by presenting a "live" performance of *Oedipus Rex* at odds with the crowd-pleasing confection promised not only by the main characters, but by the very presence of Fred Astaire. As a washed-up Hollywood star about to attempt a comeback in a new Broadway musical, in one scene he waits in the wings as the

prospective director finishes a performance as Oedipus. Film director Vincente Minnelli captures Astaire's visible dismay as he witnesses the production: a set consisting of a ruined temple drenched in red light where the blinded Oedipus declaims in a garish sculptural green robe toward an off-screen chorus engaged in atonal chanting. "That guy's going to direct a musical?" gapes Astaire. Indeed, the director's proposed high-art production of *Faust* flops, forcing Astaire to renovate it into a musical comedy smash.

The Oedipus scene serves numerous thematic and metacinematic functions for *The Band Wagon*. Astaire's skeptical reaction to the staging of Sophocles' tragedy serves as a mass-oriented satirical lens, designed to alienate the movie's audience by undermining the show's aesthetic validity as a style of theater associated with elite art forms. Although *The Band Wagon* takes place primarily within the theatrical world, its rejection of Greek tragedy and *Oedipus* specifically reflects the misalignment of "serious drama" with the values of the Hollywood musical. Certainly a genre associated with happy endings for happy couples would strain to accommodate *Oedipus*; *The Band Wagon* only does so by assimilating the theme of patricide to other scandalous topics that count as "entertainment" in popular culture. Overall, by portraying the exemplary tragedy of the classical tradition through this outré theatrical production, *The Band Wagon* both enacts and bears witness to a pointed rupture with the traditional hierarchy of cultural values, surmounted by "high art," and a discursive reconfiguration of the relationship between mass and elite. At the same time, the care with which the brief sequence is produced, in addition to its programmatic function for the film, signal the seriousness with which director Vincente Minnelli regards even a negative exemplar.

Even as a film distances itself from the cultural meaning traditionally attributed to Greek tragedy, it must hold the genre close enough to subordinate it to an alternative ideological project. In a related but different manner, in *Persona* (1966) Ingmar Bergman stages a "live" performance of *Electra* (whether by Sophocles or Euripides is unclear) to trigger his protagonist's historically situated nervous breakdown (Michelakis 2013: 151–152). Bergman's use of Greek tragedy is thus akin to the function of *Oedipus* as the flashpoint for ideological conflict in *The Band Wagon* but differs in its orientation toward an individual's psychological experience of historical trauma rather than class politics.

Individuals' traumatic experiences have also been explored through "in rehearsal" movies. Such films integrate the theatrical process of creation and the act of performance with the "real world" as represented by the film. Jules Dassin does this for Euripides' *Medea* in *A Dream of Passion* (1978), as does Werner Herzog for Aeschylus's *Oresteia* in *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done?* (2009). In all these cases, however, the theatrical material clearly is

serving cinematic ends. The directors must contend with capturing theatrical performance on screen, but viewers are not challenged to determine their relationship to the "live" spectacle, which is enclosed by design within the narrative and the visual frames of the recorded medium. To return to a concern broached at the outset of this chapter: when the day comes that virtual reality is indeed the mechanism through which viewers consume what was once screen-media, how will these boundaries delimiting levels of engagement, by internal and external audiences, be negotiated anew?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my research assistants Matthew Lopez and Darcy Cogswell funded by the Trinity College Faculty Research Committee; for access to the Gaziadas film, Antony Augoustakis; for access to the *Omnibus* episode, Morgan Strong at Global ImageWorks; for access to Robert Saudek's papers, Joan Miller at the Wesleyan University Film Archive; and for media acquisitions, Yuksel Serindag, Amy Rua and Kellie O'Donnell at the Trinity College Library.

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CHAPTER NINE

Greece and Rome on the Comic Screen

Lisa Maurice

If comedy on screen has been around as long as the screen itself, comedies that interact with history have almost as long a provenance. Such comedies may take various forms—parody (which follows quickly on from established forms as they become clichéd), comedies set in distinct historical periods, "timeslips," whereby characters travel from one age to another, and screen adaptations of comedies from earlier time periods. The study of comedies such as these is still in its infant stages, but some of the features that typify historical comedies are, as outlined by Salmi, and reinforced by D'Arcens, "the conscious use of anachronisms, the deconstruction and revision of genre conventions, and the "othering" of the past, i.e. making it strange and absurd which often seems to be the case" (Salmi 2011: 10; D'Arcens 2014:14). These techniques can be seen in the comic depictions of both Greece and Rome on screen, but most notable is the way that the ancient world is used in order to critique a wide range of contemporary concerns, including attitudes to war, imperialism, gender roles and social issues. Such depictions are naturally influenced by the societies producing the various movies, so that, for example, the British depiction of ancient Rome differs considerably from the American. The following outline considers the representation of ancient Greece and Rome, both as social commentary and as parody, in Europe and the United States, and finally in Britain.

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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Ancient Greece on Screen

Greek comedy

One of the most obvious receptions of comedy on screen is the reimagining or adaptation of Greek or Roman comedies. Of all the ancient comedians, only the works of Aristophanes, Plautus and Terence (and perhaps Menander) have survived in any quantity. Of these artists, it is the classical Athenian comedian, Aristophanes, whose works have been adapted most often for screen. Although eleven of Aristophanes' plays are extant, it is Lysistrata that has caught the eye of film makers, on no less than seventeen occasions.[1]

The earliest film version of the *Lysistrata* was an Austrian production from 1947, originally released as *Triumph der Liebe*. This version, described by the *New York Times Review* as a "heavy and tedious rendition of the comedy of Aristophanes" kept the original premise and setting of ancient Athens for the play, while costuming it in a range of anachronistic styles and giving it elements of comic operetta, and including bit comedy scenes between Aristophanes and Diogenes.[2] The movie, produced in Austria in the American zone, under the supervision of the United States army, is given a contemporary slant by screenwriter Karl Loser, as he portrays a population that desires an end to the war that its leaders wish to prolong.[3]

Destinées, a 1954 Franco-Italian co-production, also released as *Daughters of Destiny* in the United States and as *Love, Soldiers and Women* in the United Kingdom, was a rather broader treatment of the themes of love and war, consisting of a trilogy of stories, of which Lysistrata is the last. The Lysistrata section follows on from "Elizabeth," the tale of an American woman widowed in the Second World War who travels to Italy to bring back his body and discovers that her husband has had an affair there resulting in a child; and a retelling of Joan of Arc, after she has been abandoned by her king and army. The rather tenuous connection between the three is set out by the narrator, ("Just call me Destiny!") who invites us to meet the three women: "Elizabeth, a victim of the war, Jeanne, who made war and Lysistrata, who fought against the war." Although the film was not a huge success,[4] it is an interesting reception of *Lysistrata*. The alien and historical Greekness of the segment is emphasized, and its difference from the other two components of the trilogy is notable. Along with its poorly crafted sets, props and costumes, the *Lysistrata* section includes some exaggerated overacting, which, it has been suggested is intentional, in an attempt to create a comic "carnival" atmosphere (Duarte 2011: 125–127). If so, this was a self-conscious attempt to recreate in film not the details of plot (there are some considerable differences between the two in this regard), but the atmosphere of an Aristophanic play.

The Second Greatest Sex (USA 1955), is a very different kind of movie. A combination of Western and musical genres, this version of the Lysistrata story was Universal's answer to the successful *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* of 1954 (Solomon, 2001, 284). Set in Osawkie, Kansas, in the 1850s, in this movie the men of three different towns are fighting over some important records in a certain safe, and the plot evolves when this Lysistrata (Liza) arranges a marital sex strike after her husband goes off to take part in this affair on their wedding night. This movie, according to a recent study by Emily B. Klein, "provocatively employs some of the conventions of the two genres to resist the typical Western themes of rugged masculinity and imperialist expansion" and "offers a unique commentary on tropes of Cold War gender roles" (Klein 2014: 64–65). Thus it uses the basic *Lysistrata* plot but to very different ends—the message of this film reinforces gender stereotypes of the 1950s, in a light-hearted and sexually bland musical spectacular romp that is far removed from the original.

The 1960s saw various screen versions of the *Lysistrata*, ranging from the lightweight Spanish comedy, *Escuela De Seductoras* (1962), which was only tenuously based on the Aristophanic original, to pieces with serious contemporary resonance. Perhaps the most striking of the latter was a German production from 1961, called *Die Sendung der Lysistrata*, which has the distinction of providing the first media scandal in West German television. This version of the story utilizes a contemporary frame around the classical centerpiece, as Agnes, an actress who is starring in a televised version of *Lysistrata*, and her husband, who is a chemist, watch the television broadcast which is the central section of the program, enabling the viewer to watch both the contemporary segment and the ancient play within a play. The contemporary context emerges as it becomes clear that Agnes's chemist husband has invented a new fuel and is anticipating a financially attractive offer from the United States. His wife is afraid, however, that the results of his work will be exploited for military purposes, endowing the whole Lysistrata plot with a clear anti-nuclear agenda, [5] which had strong contemporary resonance at a time when Adenauer's nuclear ambitions were a hot topic for West Germany (Nehring 2004). The 1964 BBC television version of the Lysistrata, *Women on Strike*, reflects a similar contemporary British concern with nuclear war. This production was described by *The Times* as "Televised Aristophanes with a Nuclear Slant": the film opened with "a film clip of a mushroom cloud superimposed over an image of the Athenian Acropolis."[6]

Nuclear power was not the only subject for attack by the screen versions of *Lysistrata* however. Feminism was the issue being explored by one Lysistrata version from the late nineteen sixties, the Swedish *Flickorna* (1968) (released in English as *The Girls*). This film depicted the lives of three

actresses on tour with the play *Lysistrata* in Sweden. It interweaves the women's relationship with their husbands and lovers, and their dependence and lack of freedom, with the issues of the ancient play, as director Mai Zetterling turned Lysistrata into a feminist symbol (Winkler 2014: 923–928). A more political agenda was behind the Greek *Lysistrata* (*Lysistrati*), directed by Giorgos Zervoulakis and starring Jenny Karezi, and her husband, Kostas Kazakos, in a movie made under the military junta that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974, with junta approval, but which parodied and mocked those very figures of power (Winkler 2014: 929–931; Garcia Valverde 2010).

While the *Lysistrata* continued to appear on stage in the second half of the twentieth century, a period marked by pacifism, anti-war, and anti-imperialist feeling in light of the world wars, and those in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, it is in the twenty-first century that a large number of movie versions have been produced. Francesca Bellmunt's Spanish *Lisístrata* (2002), based upon Ralf König's 1987 comic book, was, in Bellmunt's own words, "an anti-war comedy in ancient dress," in light of American involvements in the middle east, and which also along the way champions both, as Martin Winkler puts it, gay lib and women's lib (Winkler 2014: 932). *Absurdistan* (Germany/Azerbaijan 2008), set in an isolated mountain village in the former Soviet Union, portrays a war between the sexes, as the local women decide to withhold sex until the men mend the pipeline that supplies the village with water. Similarly, *The Source* (*La Source des femmes*) (Belgium/Italy/France 2011) depicts life in a remote North African village whose women go on a sex strike in protest against having to fetch water from a distant well. The same year saw *Where Do We Go Now?* (France/Lebanon/Egypt/Italy 2011), directed by the Lebanese Nadine Labaki, which was also compared to *Lysistrata*. In this movie, set in an isolated Lebanese village surrounded by land-mines, the Christian and Muslim women work together to try and prevent warfare between the males of the two religious groups. Although this film does not have the usual sex strife motif, it does present the idea of unempowered women in traditional societies working to end conflict caused by men.

All of these films, in fact, promote this message, and all depict women in traditional male-dominated societies, which might raise the question of how relevant the *Lysistrata* plot and motif is in the developed democratic Western world of the twentieth century, and for how much longer adaptations of the play will continue to appear on screen. Nevertheless, a new version, Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* appeared as recently as 2015. In this version, described as a "searing satire of gun violence in America," Lysistrata is in love with aspiring Rapper Demtrius "Chi-Raq" Dupree, but she is disturbed by the bloody war between his Spartan gang and the rival Trojans. When Patti, an 11-year-old

neighborhood girl, is accidentally killed in a drive-by shooting, Lysistrata, desperate to do something to stop the escalating bloodshed, persuades the Spartan and Trojan women to swear off sex with their men until the fighting stops.[7] It seems that even as a comedy based on male prejudices in contemporary America, there is still life in the plot of the Lysistrata.

Greek mythology

Outside of Aristophanes, ancient Greece appears on the comic screen only in regard to its mythology. The earliest example is the 1927 silent film, *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, now surviving only in partial form.[8] Based on John Erskine's bestselling novel of 1925, but a very different creation from its source, this movie, with its opulent and lavish costumes, was a smash hit, directed by Alexander Korda and starred his wife, Maria, as Helen. Portraying the Spartan princess as a shopaholic fashion-driven starlet, this movie was also a critique of industrialists and their attitude to war (Malamud 2013). This Helen lives for her clothes, while her husband, Menelaus, wants only to be left in peace to go fishing. Much of the humor here is derived from the stereotyped marital clash of expectations (Helen declares, for example, that "Marriage is only exchanging the attention of a dozen men for the inattention of one"). Another more contemporarily topical thread is that of the downsizing of the great Trojan War, which now becomes a chance to get even with "them Trojan dress makers," the popularity of whose beautiful clothing has ruined the Spartan economy. This reflects the emerging rivalry between Paris and New York with regard to culture, building, music, but particularly fashion, in the mid-1920s and 1930s (Magidson 2008).

Topicality is also obvious in the 1933 movie, *The Warrior's Husband*, a Pre-Production Code satire of the societal gender roles in society. Based on a stage play from the previous year starring Katherine Hepburn, the film is set in the land of Pontus where Queen Hippolyta rules, and the women of Pontus work, fight and govern. The movie features the arrival of Theseus and his friend Hercules, in search of the magic girdle of Diana. Theseus falls in love with Hippolyta's sister, Antiope, Queen of the Amazons, and after initial hesitation, she returns his affections. Realizing the value of male leadership, the Amazons then willingly allow the men to assume power. Clearly this comedy utilizes myth as a way for men to affirm their own masculinity, power and control (Goldstein 2001: 17), and does so in a way that the Code would soon make impossible: as Mainon and Ursini state, the movie pokes fun at gender roles "in a period before Hollywood caved into pressure and enacted the stifling Production Code, that, among other things, put a damper on overt references to 'deviant' sexuality" (Mainon and Ursini 2006: 25).

Although Hercules does feature in *The Warrior's Husband*, he plays a much more the central role in four other movies: the first is a six and a half minute Popeye cartoon from 1954 entitled *Greek Mirthology* while the other two, the American *The Three Stooges meet Hercules* and the Italian *Maciste contro Ercole nella valle dei guai* (*Hercules in the Vale of Woe*), date from 1961 and have notable similarities. The final and most extensive case is that of Disney's *Hercules*, which started as a full length animated movie in 1997 and then led to a spin off television series that ran to sixty-five episodes (1998–1999).

Even in the ancient world, Hercules was often a comic figure, portrayed as a lecher, a glutton, a drunkard and a cross-dresser, according to the various myths surrounding the figure. Thus, he would seem to be a predictable figure for screen comedy. Yet in modern cinematic versions, however, the only comic aspect highlighted in ancient works that does figure is his extraordinary, superhuman strength. Popeye's Hercules is characterized only by his strength as he is able to push a fully grown tree into the ground in order to help a baby bird. In *Hercules in the Vale of Woe*, Hercules is the typical strongman, able to shift huge rocks and armed with an enormous club, while in the *Three Stooges meet Hercules*, Hercules cracks nuts by squeezing them with his bulging biceps and lifts enormous boulders.

Both of the Hercules movies are time-travel films that spoof the popular Italian-produced peplum films, particularly *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*, which starred muscleman Steve Reeves and which were released in the United States in 1958 and 1960 respectively. *Hercules in the Vale of Woe* lampoons the entertainment industry, and mocks the weakness of modern man while simultaneously caricaturing the exaggerated film portrayals of the heroes of Greek mythology.[9] Similarly, there is an element of parody of the sword-and-sandal film here in that the evil king, Eurystheus, looks and sounds very like Peter Ustinov's Nero in *Quo Vadis* (1951). Yet it is in fact more of a light hearted peplum movie than a true parody, with Hercules (and Maciste who also features) the typical muscleman of this genre. In this movie, Mario and Raymond, two small-time wrestling promoters travel to what is described as 7,000 years back in time, to ancient Greece. They arrive at the court of Eurystheus, who takes them for soothsayers. He then orders them to help Hercules in his battle against Maciste, who wants to marry Deianeira. Maciste himself is under a spell cast by Circe, but regains his strength with the help of the nymph, Echo, and the fight with Hercules takes place. However, before it ends, Mario and Raymond managed to escape back to their own time, leaving the two stereotyped strongmen to continue to fight it out for eternity.

Despite the similarities in premise and plot,[10] *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules* is actually a very different kind of film from *Hercules in the Vale of Woe*.

The Hercules of the *Three Stooges* version in particular is a far from standard portrayal, as Daniel O Brien (2011) explicates. In this film, in which the three travel back in time from Ithaca, New York, to the island of Ithaca, Hercules himself is not the brave hero, or even the drunken buffoon. In fact, he is a vicious brute with almost no intelligence, who is in the end defeated by the newly transformed Schyler, who has built up his muscles as a result of his rowing in the slave galley. It is Schyler who forces Hercules to reform his ways and support Ulysses rather than the evil King Odius presently ruling Ithaca, thus restoring history to its rightful path.

By inverting the character of Hercules, the *Three Stooges Meet Hercules* is not only parodying the peplum movies, as evidenced by the inclusion of elements of the Hercules myth portrayed in the peplum films, such as the Cretan bull, the hydra and the Nemean lion, but also sword-and-sandal films.[11] As O Brien (191–192) explains, "*The Three Stooges Meet Hercules* is more clearly a burlesque of multiple genres as a whole, including the peplum, rather than a spoof of any particular film." Some individual films are clearly being targeted; in particular, *Ben-Hur* (1959) features strongly, particularly in the scenes of galley slaves and in the chariot "car-chase" pursuit towards the end of the movie, in which the evil Odius's chariot is complete with the mandatory blades on the wheels. Other more generally "ancient" elements are also burlesqued, however, with the great Iliadic hero Achilles becoming "Achilles the Heel," a Chicago style gangster running a protection racket, and with the Cyclops in this version turning out to be a "Siamese cyclops," with two one-eyed heads. There is the obligatory "harem" scene, a sand-timer watch and the inevitable quip when looking at a road sign "I'll hit the first guy who says 'it's all Greek to me'."

A later take on Hercules was the Disney animated movie of 1997, which while not a straight comedy also possessed comic elements. The film, as Martin Winkler describes, is "a witty rewriting of Greek myth as a satire of modern consumerism and celebrity cults. "Herc" becomes a sports superstar and, for example, the sponsor of "Grecian Express" credit cards. His romantic entanglements with Megara ("Meg"), a slinky and sultry redhead with a New York accent, and his defeat of his arch-enemy Hades lead to the inevitable happy ending on Mount Olympus" (Winkler 2009: 92). Hades himself, voiced by James Wood, is a fast talking Hollywood agent/used car salesman character, who provides some of the funniest moments, while even the leading lady is, in the words of one review, "on the sardonic side, unusual for a Disney heroine. Meg is the descendant of a Barbara Stanwyck film noir character, fast with a clever line ('It's been a real… slice')."[12] The film in general is full of pop culture references and jokes understandable only to someone with a knowledge of Greek Mythology. Thus "Phil," Hercules's trainer (Philoctetes), tells the hero to watch out when he hits his head

on the mast of the Argo, a reference to the myth of the death of Jason, and Hermes, played by Paul Shaffer, quips, "I haven't seen so much love in one room since Narcissus fell in love with himself."

Rome on the Comic Screen

The silent era

One of the earliest classical comedies on film was the French 1903 production, *Jupiter's Thunderbolts.* Directed by Georges Méliès, the short movie parodies the great and all powerful god, who in this version has sent his thunderbolts off for repair. When he receives them back, however, they are still damaged, for when hurled, they produce set-destroying fire and explosions, in a show of groundbreaking special effects so beloved by the one-time stage magician, Méliès (Abel 1994: 400). Ancient Rome was also the subject of two of the animated one-reel silent comedies in the Hysterical History series, produced in 1924–5, *Antony and Cleopatra* (1924) and *Nero* (1925).

As long as there have been genres of films, film-makers have enjoyed parodying them, and the more classic and successful the movie, the more suitable it is for satire. This is as true of movies set in ancient Rome as of any other films. With time, as the movie industry itself developed and the ancient world became a familiar screen setting, parody became a favored response. Rolin's *Luke, the Gladiator* (1916, dir. H. Roach), starring Harold Lloyd as Lonesome Lukius, was followed by *Friends, Romans and Leo* (1917, dir. A. Crosland), a slapstick packed tale of Mulius Caesar and his money troubles, and *Romans and Rascals* (1918), featuring gloomy young King Seezer.

Thus in 1923, a silent movie entitled *The Three Ages* was released, which was a parody of *Intolerance* and starred Buster Keaton (who would later appear in Lester's Plautine remake), in his first full-length feature (Neibaur and Niem 2013: 233). Composed of three intercut plots set in three different historical periods—"The Stone Age," "Rome In all Her Glory," and "The Present Age of Need, Speed and Greed" (referring to the 1920s)—the film depicted the same scenario in each, that of two men, an "Adventurer" and a "Worshipper" fighting to win a girl, described as "Beauty."[13]

Lavish sets, instantly recognizable as classical scenes, mock the opulence of the depiction of ancient Rome on screen. Iconic scenes and elements spoof particular productions, drawing particularly on the rich Ben-Hur tradition (the book, stage play and 1907 Kalem film, although the longer MGM film would only be released in 1925), but also recalling *Quo Vadis?* (1913) and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1913). A series of anachronistic elements (a sundial

watch and a chariot with number plate and spare wheel) and slapstick scenes undercut this carefully composed appearance of antiquity, showing it to be fake, creating comedy through their incongruity, and destroying the traditional tone of moral didacticism promoted by historical non-comic films. The high culture of the historical film has become domestic comedy and farce in the vaudeville tradition in this production (Wyke 2013: 275–296; Sweeney 2007a). With the release of *Ben-Hur* in 1925, more spoofs followed. Fox produced a parody of the movie in 1927, entitled *A Roamin' Gladiator*, which is no longer in existence, but another similar spoof from the following year has fared better. *Roaming Romeo*, an American two-reel production from 1928 (released in Britain as *Bending Her* in parody of *Ben-Hur*) is a burlesque of all things ancient Roman on screen. In this movie, Belle-Hure and Horatio Babaorum, played by Lupino and Wallace Lane, escape from a Roman galley, steal uniforms of two Roman soldiers who have gone for a swim, and then end up in a Roman palace where they indulge in their slapstick routines and parodies of the ancient world. These include standard scenes of vestal virgins, gladiators and men dressed up as white marble statues to evade pursuit (Dixon 2010: 32).

Perhaps the most popular source of parody at this time, however, was Theda Bara's 1917 *Cleopatra*.[14] Only a year later, in 1918, Buster Keaton and Fatty Arbuckle's *The Cook* included a hilarious parody of this depiction of the Egyptian queen, with Arbuckle as a chef, improvising a Bara-like bodice of saucepans and a dustpan for a skirt, and with a string of sausages in lieu of an asp. Dora Rodgers parodied the vampish Bara in the 1918 Rolin studios version entitled *Cleopatsy*, in which the Roman general Mark Handy pays a visit to Alexandria to deal with the troublesome Cleopatsy, who is refusing to pay taxes. A Mutt and Jeff cartoon entitled *Cleopatra* appeared in 1920, and the Lee-Bradford Corporation's *Cleopatra and Her Easy Mark* at some point in the early years of the same decade.[15] Nor were comic Cleopatras limited to the United Sstates: the Rumanian *Nabdaile Cleopatrei* (*The Furies of Cleopatra*) (1925) featured a scene in which the hero, George, dreams he is Mark Antony enslaved by Cleopatra. As late as 1928 the trend was still alive, as Vitaphone's *Cleo to Cleopatra* reflects, although with the silent movie era now giving way to the talkies, sound was added to Daphne Pollard's Cleopatra.

The talkies: Lampooning political ideology through rome

One of the most interesting talkies is Rheinhold Schünzel's *Amphitryon* (1935). Based not only on Plautus, but also on both Moliere's 1668 comedy and even more centrally, Heinrich von Kleist's *Amphitryon* (1807), the 1935 film is a musical comedy, an extravagant, expensive production that is quite

removed from Kleist's more serious metaphysically laden play.[16] Made under the Nazi regime, the director, Reinhold Schünzel, who was Jewish but had been granted honorary Aryan status (and who fled to America in 1937), filled the movie with puns, pointed remarks and elements that parodied prominent Nazi officials, particularly Göring. Even the title, "Happiness comes down from the clouds," was a mocking reference to Hitler himself, parodying his descent from the clouds in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. Yet the framing of this parody in the distant mythological past allowed the film to pass Goebbels' censorship (Kreimeier 1999: 231–233). Made simultaneously in French as *Les Dieux s'amusent* and released in this version in America, the movie was nevertheless boycotted for a short time in the United States because of its Nazi connections, but then was released, to critical approval, in New York and beyond in the spring of 1937 (Hake 2001: 240–241; Hull 1999: 84).

While almost all comedic portrayals of Rome contain elements of parody, the central focus of some films is lampooning of a specific model. The Italian *Nerone* of 1930 provides an example of ancient Rome used as parody, this time of the concept of "Romanness" or *romanità* under Italian Fascism. Starring the comedian Ettore Petrolini, this cinematic version of a stage act featured Petrolini as Nero, but also incorporated clown elements of a red nose and baggy trousers along with the wreath on his head. Even more tellingly, this Nero's facial expressions were strongly reminiscent of Mussolini, while the screen emperor rides a bicycle and sets fire to Rome with a box of matches, as well as calling the fire brigade and telling them that he wishes to rebuild Rome in cement. While Petrolini's Nero does parody Mussolini, it is not clear that this parody was a subversive undercutting of the Fascist regime, for the movie was a filmed version of a stage act that Petrolini had been performing since 1917, in response to the movie *Quo Vadis?* (Wyke 1997: 130). It is also obvious that the comedian was an admirer of the dictator. He wrote him a letter addressing him as "Benito Mussolini, sole di Roma" ("Sun of Rome"), and on another occasion declared "Farò di tutto per dimostrarvi che sono degno della lettera inviatami e della vostra alta considerazione" ("I will do everything to demonstrate to you that I am worthy of the letter sent to me and your high consideration").[17] It has even been suggested that Mussolini, who was a fan of Petrolini, on one occasion covering his face as he collapsed laughing during a performance of the Petrolinian Nero, was actually influenced by the comic, rather than the other way around. Nevertheless, by the time the movie *Nerone* was released in 1930, it produced negative reaction in the Italian press, which felt that such an undignified portrayal of the great Roman leader (Nero/Mussolini) should not be presented to the world (Wyke 1997: 130).

The talkies: Comic rome in the USA

The USA, as the global center of the movie industry, also utilized ancient Rome as vehicle for critiquing its own society. Some movies aim to do no more than lampoon screen stereotypes of the ancient world. Thus the Italian comedy O.*K. Nerone* (1951), released simultaneously in the USA as *OK Nero*, was filmed on the discarded set of *Quo Vadis*, and came out the same year in deliberate parody of the epic movie, as is reflected by the movie poster which declares "Quo Laughter! It's a Roaring Carnival of Roman Spectacle and Fun." The comic version was a time-slip tale of two American sailors, who are knocked out while sight-seeing in Rome and dream they are back in Neronian Rome. They indulge in a series of anachronistic adventures, including a pocket billiards contest, setting up an amusement park, playing American football with an urn as the ball and jitterbugging. The standard motifs of scantily clad females, arena gladiator fights and chariot races feature in this lampoon of the epic sword and sandal genre.

Other movies, however, go beyond the world of Hollywood, to highlight wider social or political issues. *Roman Scandals* (1933) is a depression-era musical comedy starring Eddie Cantor and produced by Samuel Goldwyn parodying epic screen depictions of ancient Rome and offering a critique of contemporary American politics and society (Malamud 2009: 194–207). In this movie, the hero, Eddie, is transported to Imperial Rome, where he discovers corruption that echoes that of the capitalist and divided world of the United States in the 1930s. Like the later *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* the movie featured elements of vaudeville, with Eddie Cantor, a Jewish vaudeville comedian, mocking the idea of the nobility of Rome, through the quick patter of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant who epitomizes the American democratic dream. Through a series of comic scenes that send up the stereotypes of cinematic Rome, including chariot chases, orgies and slave markets,[18] the movie provided both a message of hope for the starving and unemployed millions of spectators, as well as escapism through the Busby Berkeley numbers that "allowed Depression audiences simultaneously to enjoy and condemn spectacles of excess, sadism and consumption set in ancient Rome" (Malamud 2009: 202).

Jupiter's Darling, a 1955 MGM musical, starring swimmer Esther Williams as Amytis, the fiancé of the Roman general Fabius Maximus, who ultimately loses out to Hannibal in the contest for Amytis' love, while a box office flop, was also a response to contemporary America, at a different period. This film offers an interesting commentary on the accuracy of traditional history. It includes the character "Horatio the historian," ostensibly Hannibal's official chronicler, who actively distorts the truth when writing his account of the

Punic War, and describes the events portrayed as "some of the dizziest events that were never recorded in the history books on Rome" (Eldridge 2006: 181–182).[19] Although the movie was not released until 1955, it had been in development for over twenty years, and its attitude reflects responses to both Fascist and communist rewriting of history (Eldridge 2006: 183–188).

A far more famous and influential comic portrayal of Rome was Richard Lester's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966). Although based on the Stephen Sondheim's stage musical, and using an abbreviated form of the libretto, the movie version, with book by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart had some significant differences, reordering parts of the plot and cutting eight of the original songs. Just as Plautus was a Romanized, updated take on Greek new comedy, so the stage play was a combination of the Roman and American comic traditions, including elements of vaudeville, burlesque, musical comedy and Borscht-belt Jewish comedy, along with Plautine elements (Malamud 2001; Cyrino 2005: 159–176). Lester's film adaptation added yet more layers to the concoction, as he introduced references to the movie tradition, in particular through his inclusion of Buster Keaton, star of the early cinema farce, as Erronius.

Through its conflation of comedic strands and sources, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was therefore able to provide contemporary social commentary on American society: questions of ethnicity were highlighted by Zero Mostel's combined identity as Jew and slave; the question of slavery at all, so prominent in the movie, took on new meaning in an era in which ideas of freedom were being trumpeted, especially against the background of McCarthyism; similarly, issues of warfare and imperial aggression in light of the Vietnam war can be seen in the depiction of Miles Gloriosus (Malamud 2001: 196; Cyrino 2005: 171–174).

Lester also exploited the movie genre in a way that had not been possible on the stage as he parodied the great epic movies of the 1950s and early 1960s. These parodies took place through visual depictions that deliberately subverted the traditional appearance of Rome on screen as a city of gleaming white marble, by depicting its seamy underside and filth. Even more centrally, he utilized scenes that comically recalled and underscored both the general elements of sword and sandal movies—chariot races, gladiators, orgies and other such standard delights—and also particular movies or scenes, such as the iconic chariot race of *Ben-Hur* (Elley 1984: 88; Galinsky 2010: 400; Paul 2013: 294–295).

Mel Brooks's *History of the World, Part 1* (USA 1981) also uses comedy to critique social issues, particularly abuse of power and persecution of minorities (Yacowar 1981; Cyrino 2005: 194–206). Consisting of four episodes, set in the Stone Age, the Roman Empire, the Spanish Inquisition, and the French

Revolution, the humor of this movie, typically of Brooks' work, is raw, crude, in bad taste and distinctly not politically correct, with an emphasis on slapstick and scatological jesting. Parodying the screen epics of Cecil B. DeMille and D. W. Griffith (although Brooks himself saw it as a tribute to such films; Cyrino 2005: 197–200), the Roman segment parodies the genre of sword and sandal movies. In particular, it utilizes historical anachronism, producing incongruities that are "intended to produce laughs, but they also reveal—and subvert—a sophisticated sense of historical chronology" (Crick 2002: 6; Schultz 2007: xxiv). As in *Roman Scandals* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, the Jewish comedian exploits his status as an outsider, a member of a minority, in order to invert positions of power, and thereby arouse empathy with the underdog (Abramson 2005: 127). Brooks himself explained that his comedy "comes from the feeling that, as a Jew and as a person, you don't fit into the mainstream of American society. It comes from the realization that even though you're better and smarter, you'll never belong" (Zimmerman 1975: 57). Other minorities also feature in the same way—the slave Josephus is played for example by Gregory Hines, an African American—and function as historical counternarrative, which exploits feelings of otherness and anxiety as the source of comedy. These elements come together to provide political and social commentary on the America of the 1970s, highlighting issues such as unemployment, the role of the military and the police, and the sex and drugs culture of the 1960s (Cyrino 2005: 203–205).

The most recent comedic treatment concerning ancient Rome to emerge from Hollywood is not a parody of Rome itself, or even of contemporary America, but of the great screen epics of the 1950s. The Coen brothers, *Hail, Caesar!* (2016) is both a tribute to and a gentle parody of the big screen Hollywood productions of the period, including of course the sword-and-sandal epic. This movie includes mild satire on the genre as a whole but also pegs two specific Christians-against-Romans movies, *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *The Robe* (1953). As one review comments,

> The opening scenes and dialogue are almost the same, as is the tepid bacchanal attended by George Clooney's Centurion. Clooney looks amusingly "right" in Baird Whitlock's Roman soldier costume, with its pleated skirt. The final scene at the Cross makes fun of the already rather funny finale of *The Robe* with Richard Burton. All that transcendent enlightenment must be invented and acted like any other scene, which gives us the hilarious spectacle of Baird Whitlock trying out twenty different faces of Awe and Wonder.[20]

Perhaps with the new age of big screen epics in the second millennium, and the self-conscious awareness of film as film in the post-modern age, such

parodies, with their nostalgic harking back to the first great age of such movies, are inevitable; whether the wave of modern "ancient" movies will lead to parodies of themselves in the coming years will be an interesting point for which to watch.

The talkies: Ancient rome on the british screen

Ancient Rome is part of the British cultural heritage, with Roman Britain being taught in school curricula and remains of Roman heritage visible on a wide scale. Rome, therefore, is a recognizable trope and potential source of comedy in Britain. The earliest British comic screen portrayal of Rome dates from the Second World War, in the form of an Ealing comedy, Tommy Trinder's *Fiddlers Three* (1944), in which two soldiers are transported back to Ancient Rome at the time of Nero. The script of the film was full of gags likening the hardships and shortages of wartime Britain to ancient Rome.[21] Thus, Nero, for example, rebukes Poppaea for using too much milk in her bath, and forbids an extravagant funeral during wartime. Links between Rome and Britain are played up (one of Trinder's songs includes the line "There's a Hippodrome in Leicester Square, and a Circus in Piccadilly"). This identification of ancient Roman with contemporary Britain is a common trope of British literature of the same period (Butler and O'Donovan 2012: 17–47), but in this case with the Roman emperor as the (ultimately harmless) enemy of British sailors taking on extra resonance at a time of war. Like many film parodies of ancient Rome, cinematic Rome is also referenced and lampooned: at one point a Roman barber tells the time-travelers that they had had Eddie Cantor visit a few years earlier, in an allusion to the 1933 movie *Roman Scandals*.

Such parodies of movie elements became even more central in the post-war period, with the popularity of cinematic versions of the ancient world in the 1950s and 1960s. The last of these great screen epics was of course Twentieth Century-Fox's 1963 *Cleopatra*, starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, which captured both headlines and the public imagination for months on end (Winkler 2009: 277–280; Cyrino 2005: 140–141), and which was directly parodied in the British "Carry On" film of the next year, *Carry On Cleo*. This movie clearly lampooned the Burton–Taylor epic, in fact using many of the same sets and costumes as the earlier film (Cull 2001). Yet it was also a supremely British movie, incorporating many of the gags seen in *Fiddlers Three* (for example, the accidental cutting off of the arms of the Venus de Milo statue, men dressing up as women, a slave auction, the aforementioned milk bath), so much so that one scholar declares of the Trinder film that "Much of the comedy appears like an early draft of *Carry*

On Cleo."[22] Just as *Fiddlers Three* was a satire on wartime Britain, *Carry on Cleo* is a British take on issues current in the early 1960s, including class and the role of women in society (Gray 1998).

Although a British influence is evident in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in the cinematic style of Lester,[23] as he adopted "the vibrant and impressionistic visual style of early 1960's British rock and roll movies" (Cyrino 2005: 170), the issues and humor of the movie are unmistakably American. The British take on this comedy came in the form of *Up Pompeii!*, showcasing Frankie Howerd, who had starred in the British stage production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. His success in this part prompted Michael Mills, head of comedy at the BBC, to commission a similar role for the actor for television (Cull 2001: 180–181). *Up Pompeii!* aired for two seasons in 1969 and 1970 and a full-length movie released in 1971[24] was a popular success if not a critical one (Waymark 2012, 143).

Although inspired by *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Up Pompeii!* is markedly different in its humor and its mood owes far more to the *Carry On* films than to *Forum*. The comedy is one of smutty innuendo and double entendres, the atmosphere one of seaside postcards and camp comedy, rather than the Borscht belt (Cull 2001: 179–183). As Bernard Richards, editor of *The Times* wrote, Frankie Howerd was one of those comedians who "helped to give a strong sense of what it is to be English. They represent the eccentric, rebellious and critical side of the English character, the reluctance to be overawed and bullied by systems and restrictions."[25]

This rebellion is markedly different from that in the American culture, in which otherness, the nature of being an immigrant, and, especially, slavery play a large part. While slavery figures in *Up Pompeii!*—Howerd's role is the slave Lurcio—the attitude towards slavery in Britain carries little of the loaded significance that marks the United States as a natural result of its history.[26] Where Zero Mostel yearns to be "Free! Free!", and this desire for freedom motivates his actions throughout, the British Howerd exhibits no such desire for freedom for freedom's sake. Slavery in *Up Pompeii* seems more in line with the *Upstairs Downstairs* depiction of the servant class than the plantation slavery of *Roots*. In fact, in the *Spartacus* episode, where the slave revolt is depicted, Lurcio does not want to join the rebellion, which is itself couched in terms of a 1960s flower-child love-fest. This has more in common with women's liberation than slavery as the nubile females are urged to loosen themselves from the bonds of slavery (leading on to the gag, "Don't be bondwomen. Be loose women"). Even though towards the end of the episode the tables are turned and for a short while Lurcio becomes the master and his owners the slaves, this doesn't last long and order (and by

implication the class-ordered British society) is restored with no regrets. In fact, Lurcio returns to his status with the words "Back to being loveable again," indicating the endearing nature of his slave persona, which is portrayed more in the line of family pet than serious hardship. The social order may be challenged by the character of Lurcio, champion of the common man, but it is never seriously threatened.

If *Up Pompeii!* was a product of its time by challenging the status quo, albeit mildly, Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* (1979) took on a whole host of beliefs and attitudes. The second full-length movie by the six-man pioneering comedy team, it is widely regarded as one of the funniest British films of all time. This tale of a man named Brian in Roman Judea, who lives out an overlapping and parallel life to that of Jesus of Nazareth, was surrounded by controversy for what was deemed to be its blasphemy in a movie that parodied the Jesus biopics of the big screen. It also satirized the life of the celebrity in the modern world, as Brian is mobbed by followers and exploited by his own supporters. Even more than this, however, it was "an attack on organized religion and conformity" (Cyrino 2005: 183), whose message according to Grahame Chapman was "think for yourselves, don't blindly follow" (Cleese et al. 2003, quoted by Cyrino 2005: 187), but it was also a specific British reaction to contemporary society and politics. Both in style, with its music hall traditions of cross-dressing, and in tone and content, with its parody of schoolboy Latin classes and the crucifixion-party centurion in the mold of a Church of England vicar, *Life of Brian* is quintessentially British. In particular, it was a strike at left-wing politics, political correctness and trade unionism, but also at the authoritarianism that was developing in response to these trends, as Michael Palin declared:

> It gave us a way to do a film about authority, about the British establishment as much as the Jewish or Roman establishment of the time. So nearly everything that we wrote in it seemed to be relevant and to be about something, and that was consciously important. (Cleese et al. 2003, quoted by Cyrino 2005: 190)

Up Pompeii! was not alone in bringing ancient Rome to the British small screen.[27] British educational and cultural familiarity with Rome has allowed for its portrayal even in sitcom format, in two separate productions, *Chelmsford 123* and *Plebs*.[28] The first of these, *Chelmsford 123*, the first creation of Hat Trick Productions,[29] aired in two series, comprising a total of thirteen episodes, in 1988 and 1990. Depicting the power struggle between the Roman governor and the local British chieftain and population in the town of Chelmsford in the year 123 AD, it capitalized on longstanding stereotypes (Britain as a miserable, perpetually rained-upon backwater, Rome as ruled by

a mad emperor who is in love with his horse), but also presents an interesting window into contemporary attitudes to Rome, and of course to modern Britain. It is a conceit that the characters in *Chelmsford 123* speak Latin (with English subtitles) when in Rome, and English, when they are "practising the native language," when in Britain, and the English that they speak is the vernacular of late twentieth-century Britain (Wagg 1994, 24). This in itself speaks to the position of Latin, the language of the Roman conqueror, in British culture even towards the end of the second millennium. Rome is presented in this series as a conquering power, but an ineffectual one, often outwitted by the honest and streetwise Badvock; yet the Britons themselves are uncultured, hairy and uncivilized compared to the Romans, who ultimately are the ruling upper class.[30]

Rome appeared again in sitcom format in the comedy series *Plebs* (2013 and 2014). Set in the city of Rome, as opposed to ancient Britain, this production is nevertheless strongly contemporary, peopled by figures that are instantly recognizable to the British audience, and in clear sitcom tradition. Thus James Donaghy in his review of the first episode enthused:

> The *Plebs* may be in Rome, doing as the Romans do, yet any of them could slip out of a toga and into an episode of *Skins* and fit right in. Marcus and Stylax could be Bob and Terry from *The Likely Lads*, Mark and Jez from *Peep Show* or Will and Jay from *The Inbetweeners*—the yin–yang of male friendship echoes down the ages.[31]

The issues of the program are similarly identifiable to the modern viewer: the pursuit of love, life in a big city, immigration, lottery tickets, visits to sexual health clinics. Squalid, sleazy, dangerous, and peopled by downtrodden yet optimistic people, this Rome is more 2007 AD than 27 BC. Yet its success reflects the place of Rome within the British psyche, which provides points of instant recognition and assumes a common cultural root. Indeed, Sam and Teddy Leifer, writers and directors of the series commented jokingly, on receiving the British Comedy Award for best new comedy:

> Our parents are in a bind: They're deeply ashamed of this filth we've produced. But now it's won an award they'll feel compelled to brag about it. Either way, *Plebs* will be the true legacy of the Roman Empire.[32]

That "filth" is both smut in tone, and physical filth in its portrayal of the city as a place of dirty hovels, a far cry from the gleaming marble of earlier screen depictions of Rome; and it is that filth which links the ancient world with contemporary Britain, according to modern sensibilities.

Conclusion

Comedy is a powerful tool. Perhaps more than many other forms of drama, it reveals the underbelly of society, the unspoken assumptions that are the backbone of a civilization. The use of "otherness" to highlight these sometimes laughable but often serious beliefs is a device that is as old as comedy itself. As in other comedies that feature different places and time periods, in those that feature the ancient world, Greece and Rome have been used in a wide range of ways, with each production being influenced by its own historical and cultural reception of the Greco-Roman world. For the classical past, specific perceptions about that world have been heavily influenced by the cinema itself, in particular with its creation of a screen Rome that has been of central importance in creating an image of that ancient world in the modern mind. Despite the common elements of this image, and its universal and instant recognizability, a very wide range of depictions has resulted, as the ancient world has been deployed in order to critique assumptions, issues and practices, which in themselves vary from society to society. A contemporary portrayal of a twenty-first century Lebanese village would seem to have little in common with a 1950s depiction of the American frontier town of a century earlier, yet both make use of the *Lysistrata*; conversely, two seemingly very similar productions such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *Up Pompeii!* are actually poles apart in their attitudes and concerns. From the earliest days of the silent movie to the twenty-first century television sitcom, the ancient world has been received, interpreted and recast in a myriad of comic ways. Yet underlying the laughter are serious issues as well, indicating the central role that Greece and Rome have played in Western cultural identity, and that this role still continues today.

NOTES

1. In particular Lysistrata has also been popular from a musical performance perspective. See Beta (2010).
2. http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A05E0DF1438EE3BBC4152DFB0668383659EDE Accessed August 19, 2014.
3. See the review in the *Syracuse Post* from September 8, 1950: http://newspaperarchive.com/us/new-york/syracuse/syracuse-post-standard/1950/09-08/page-39 . Accessed August 19, 2014.
4. It is described by one reviewer as "good, an engaging, middle-of-the-road film that, while not great, is still satisfying—not a particularly challenging or inspired

film, but watchable all the same": http://frenchfilmsite.com/reviews/FFS_Destinees_1954.html.Accessed August 21, 2014.

5. Because of this attitude, screening of *Die Sendung der Lysistrata* was banned by several television stations. The director of South German radio declared the piece "morally offensive and politically one-sided," while the co-ordinator of the Bavarian broadcast, Claus Münster, found that, "The advocates of an atomic armament are caricatured in a way which is simply unfair." The controversy surrounding the affair boiled up still further when cinema rights were granted to the producer Gyula Trebitsch, allowing the movie to be freely screened for audiences of eighteen years and older. With this development, most stations relented, and the movie was screened on January 17, 1961, in all areas apart from Bavaria, where a broadcast finally took place more than fourteen years later, on April 20, 1975. Meanwhile those who did watch the movie found that, after all the hype, it was bland in the extreme, and *Der Spiegel* even declared its opinion that the scandal had raised hopes that were never really met, and in fact, that "das Publikum sei wohl vor Langeweile davongelaufen" ("the public probably ran away from boredom") (*Der Spiegel*, 5 [January 25], 1961).
6. Amanda Wrigley, commenting on the production at https://screenplaystv.wordpress.com/2011/06/28/lysistrata-bbc-1964/.Accessed March 18, 2015.
7. http://www.officialchiraqthemovie.com/story. Accessed July 18, 2016.
8. The British Film Institute possesses three reels, one containing the beginning of the original 87-minute film, and the remaining two containing the end, one in a more expanded version than the other.
9. See, e.g., the website fantafilm, http://www.fantafilm.net/Schede/1961f/61-30.htm.Accessed March 9, 2014: "L'intreccio - che è ovvio pretesto per ridere sul mondo dello spettacolo, sulle debolezze dell'uomo moderno e sugli eroi della mitologia classica" ("The plot, which is clearly a pretext to mock the world of spectacle, the weaknesses of modern man and the heroes of classical mythology.")
10. Indeed, the fantafilm review (ibid.) states that *Hercules in the Vale of Woe* "anticipa curiosamente (per non dire in modo molto sospetto) l'americano *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*" ("curiously anticipates [not to mention in a very dubious fashion] the American *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules.*")
11. The film myths involving Hercules (and indeed those portrayed more widely in popular culture) are not always the same as the Greek mythic traditions. Hercules battles with the Cyclops for example in both of these comic movies, presumably inspired by the peplum movie *Maciste nella terra dei ciclopi*, which also appeared in 1961.
12. http://blogs.indiewire.com/animationscoop/blu-ray-review-disneys-hercules-and-tarzan-20140810 . Accessed April 9, 2014.
13. Keaton describes this himself in an interview recorded in Sweeney 2007b: 38.
14. See Solomon 2001: 63.
15. The film is no longer extant and there are three different dates (1921, 1923 and 1925) cited in modern texts for the release of this movie. See Wenzel 2004, 103.

16. For von Kleist's play, see Grafton, Most, and Settis 2010: 42; Ulea 2002: 71–75.
17. http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2006/06/18/petrolini-un-idiota-di-talento.html.Accessed December 21, 2014.
18. Many of the elements found in *Roman Scandals* were repeated in the 1942 short *Matri-Phony* starring the Three Stooges. This movie, based in part on *the Boys from Syracuse* (itself a Broadway musical adaptation of Plautus's *Menaechmi*), short as it is, included tropes that would then become standard in comedies parodying ancient Rome. These include men hiding in the women's quarters, a male dressing up as a prospective bride and the dangers of being the imperial wine taster.
19. The quote is from the *Jupiter's Darling* Pressbook, quoted by Eldridge (2006).
20. http://trailersfromhell.com/hail-caesar/#.V4x9NPl97IU.Accessed July 18, 2014.
21. Perry 1981, quoted at http://www.britmovie.co.uk/films/Fiddlers-Three_1944 . Accessed April 12, 2015.
22. The Great Ealing Film Challenge: 4: *Fiddlers Three* (1944). 2011. http://keithmjohnston.blogspot.co.il/2011/08/great-ealing-film-challenge-4-fiddlers.html.Accessed April 13, 2015.
23. Lester was the director of the two hit Beatles movies, *A Hard Day's Night* (1963) and *Help!* (1965).
24. Two television specials were also screened, one in 1975 and one, by ITV/LWT, written by Brian Leveson and Paul Minett, in 1991.
25. *The Times*, April 12 1992, quoted in Slide 1996: 115.
26. *Pace* Cull 2001: 182: "The theme of slavery predominated."
27. Although there are important differences in general between cinema and television, such differentiation falls beyond the scope of this paper, and for reasons of space I take the two merely as different examples of comic presentation of ancient Rome.
28. There was also a short segment of Roman Britain in the Blackadder Special, *Blackadder Back and Forth* (2000), in which the main jokes were the links to Blackadder characters in later periods, the use of the Latin language, the shortness of the Roman tunics and the height of the extant Hadrian's Wall, as a means of keeping out the Northern enemy.
29. This company, founded by Rory McGrath and Jimmy Mulville, who starred in the show, together with Denise O'Donoghue, subsequently went on to produce a large number of successful comedies.
30. From this point of view, the sitcom reflects typical issues of class, as outlined by Wagg 1994.
31. *The Guardian*, March 26, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2013/mar/26/plebs-laughs-past-sitcom.Accessed February 9, 2014.
32. Quoted, e.g., at http://www.comedy.co.uk/news/story/000001308/plebs_british_comedy_awards_win/.Accessed April 13, 2015.

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CHAPTER TEN

The Return of a Genre

Jerry Benjamin Pierce

In 2000, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* unexpectedly revived the classical epic genre that had lain dormant for close to forty years. A commercial and critical success, it grossed over $457 million (almost five times its $103 million budget) and was nominated for twelve Academy Awards, taking home five, including Best Picture. In the decade and a half since its release, *Gladiator's* spectacular achievements have led to over a dozen films and several cable television series set in the ancient world, a trend which does not appear to be slowing down.

In reviving the classical epic, *Gladiator* also resuscitated several thematic tropes about the ancient world. These themes include the gaudy decadence and political corruption of the elites, sexual deviance and the exploitation of the disadvantaged and powerless. These terrible aspects are almost always opposed by a selfless, masculine and heterosexual hero who seeks to right these wrongs, not for his own gain or glory, but often to avenge wronged loved ones, fulfill a sacred vow or simply to restore a generic sense of freedom to a troubled world. However, not all of *Gladiator's* successors abide by the same thematic formula, as some epics have consciously sought to add new wrinkles to the old tales. Indeed, many of the successful and well-received changes tend to reflect modern social values regarding gender and sexual norms, allowing film-makers to positively showcase non-traditional sexuality as well as provide a venue for complex and active female characters.

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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Decadence

Decadence, opulence and excess have been associated with antiquity, especially Rome, since the earliest films to show the corruption and depravity of the political elite. One of the earliest pioneers of the depiction of Roman decadence is Cecil B. DeMille's *Sign of the Cross* (1932), whose bawdy and titillating scenes shocked audiences and censors with its excessive display of Roman "depravity." Key scenes that influenced many later representations include: the now obligatory bacchanalia scene, where Marcus (Fredric March) tries to win over the chaste Mercia (Elissa Landi) through wine, song and a lesbian dance of seduction by the sultry Ancaria (Joyzelle Joyner); an infamous milk-bath scene that not only included the topless empress, Poppaea (Claudette Colbert), but that likewise ended with another lesbian-themed (and thus "illicit") moment as she ordered her friend, Dacia (Vivian Tobin), to strip naked and join her in the bath; the scenes of spectacle in the arena that showcased Roman brutality in the form of gladiatorial combat, the bloodlust of the pagan Romans who cheered it on, and their exotic decadence via the presence of lions, tigers, elephants, Pygmies and Amazons; and the epitome of decadence, the emperor Nero (Charles Laughton) himself, whose corpulent figure was usually lounging about his throne, playing the lyre as the city burned or absent-mindedly eating during the spectacles as he was fed by his servant. Taken together, DeMille's spectacle of wine, violence and hedonistic sexuality set the stage for long-lasting popular conceptions of ancient decadence and corruption frequently revisited in later films.

Subsequent films of the 1950s and 1960s continued the theme of classical decadence. *Quo Vadis* (1951) retold much the same story as *Sign of the Cross*, centered again on the decadent and overly emotional emperor Nero (Peter Ustinov), the lascivious and devious empress Poppaea (Patricia Laffan), with pet cheetahs to add to the exoticism, and their victims—innocent, pure Christians such as Lygia (Deborah Kerr). The extravagant imperial lifestyle, contrasted with that of the poor, simple Christians, is easily seen in Nero's palace with its grand throne room, the emperor's gold-embroidered silken purple robes and pillows, his ever-present golden laurel crown, a banquet scene filled with exotic foods, nubile dancing girls and ever-present slaves, and the imperial spectacle of gladiatorial combat. Similar motifs are seen in *The Robe* (1953) and its sequel, *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), with the emperor Caligula (Jay Robinson) the source of imperial excess with the numerous gladiatorial games he hosts, not as entertainment but as very public demonstrations of his absolute power. The notion of the games as a symbol of the terrible decadence of the Romans is clearly on display in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), as the entire system supporting the gladiatorial

games, from enslavement to training to combat, is done to serve the entertainment needs of the wealthy Romans, with absolutely no regard for its human toll. As Martin Winkler explains, "luxury, lurid sex, gladiatorial games, and the persecution of Christians are all seen as proof of Rome's moral decline and foreshadow its fall" (2001: 51). It is these very themes that came to be considered standard cinematic displays of Roman decadence and corruption.

When the classical world returned to the big screen with *Gladiator*, the themes of decadence and corruption returned with it. Similar in many ways to Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), *Gladiator's* plot is succinctly summed up in its tagline: "A general who became a slave. A slave who became a gladiator. A gladiator who defied an emperor." The emperor-to-be in this case, Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), like the versions of Nero or Caligula before him, is immediately introduced as decadent and pampered, standing in marked contrast to his stoic father, Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) and the pragmatic and humble general, Maximus (Russell Crowe). The first scene introducing Commodus sees him riding in an armored carriage under heavy guard, along with his sister Lucilla (Connie Nielsen). Ensconced in opulent furs and robes within the carriage, Commodus's softness is contrasted not only with the vicious battle against the Germans in the previous scene, but also with the dirty and wounded Roman soldiers he encounters as he exits. Here, his rich attire and cleanliness starkly contrast with the soldiers who have been fighting and dying for his more noble father. Even Aurelius makes this point clear upon his son's arrival. Seeing Aurelius and Maximus loudly praised by the amassed troops, Commodus rushes in to insert himself in the adulation (to the obvious displeasure of his father) asking: "Have I missed the battle?" Aurelius's reply, "You have missed the war," indicates Commodus's lack of leadership and his misbegotten sense of entitlement. Indeed, one of the critical plot points of the film is that Aurelius considers Commodus an immoral and corrupt man who, for the sake of Rome itself, must not be allowed to rule. Unfortunately, Commodus thwarted his father's plan of placing Maximus in charge by murdering the former and ordering the death of the latter.

After his ascension to the imperial throne, Commodus's decadence is further on display in his attire and his surroundings. The emphasis on royalty and his position as emperor can be seen in nearly every scene, as Commodus wears some combination of purple and gold armor almost exclusively. Likewise, in most of his public appearances before both senators and commoners, Commodus also sports a gold laurel wreath on his head. As a symbol of both kingship (as a crown) and victory over the conquered (the laurels), its prominence is perhaps intended to be ironic since Commodus earned

neither the crown nor the victory implied. Moreover, his constant wearing of the gold laurel crown is a repeated reminder of his conquest of and authority over the Roman people, and it should be noted that while Aurelius also wore purple armor with gold trim, he was never shown wearing the conquering laurels, and was actually an effective ruler who commanded troops in battle. Commodus's unearned, decadent attire here, especially the crown, is a visual descendant of the earlier portrayals of corrupt emperors like Laughton's and Ustinov's Nero and especially Robinson's Caligula, who not only wore the laurel crown constantly but also flashy ceremonial armor.

Luxury as a sign of decadence and corruption also made its way into non-Roman films such as Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004) and Zach Snyder's *300* (2006). Although Stone's version of Alexander (Colin Farrell) spent a great deal of screen time on his luxurious life as a child and young man, it was not treated as problematic until his hearty embrace of decadent courtly life, first in Babylon then later in India. While he had been tutored to enjoy moderation as opposed to excess, Alexander's peaceful conquest of the city of Babylon exposed him to a pampered lifestyle that put his early royal upbringing to shame. Although Stone's representation of Alexander is marred by conflicting and incompatible character traits, the obvious changes wrought by Alexander's unreserved embrace of decadent (here shown to be oriental) luxury had lasting negative effects on his personality, his relationships and especially his ability to command his men. Much like Mark Antony's (Richard Burton) fall from Roman stoic reserve in *Cleopatra* (1963) after his time in Egypt, Alexander's decline could easily be seen in his adoption of Persian dress and customs. Immediately after his arrival in Babylon, Alexander's attire shifted from his Macedonian uniform and the conquest it implied to silken robes and lounging about in the Babylonian palace, now sporting heavy eyeliner in the Persian style. This change in appearance is mirrored in his other excess that becomes commonplace throughout the rest of the film, and which again mirrors the decline of Antony: inebriation. Alexander's visual descent into luxury and hedonism continues through his opulent marriage to the Bactrian princess Roxanne (Rosario Dawson), wearing robes embroidered with pure gold, his drunken revelry in India which sees his own men chastise his abandonment of Macedonian values in favor of debauched Persian pleasures and the (for them) unsettling and open seduction of the eunuch Bagoas (Francisco Bosch). Like his cinematic counterparts the Roman emperors, Alexander's extravagant lifestyle is ultimately damaging to his reign, threatens his newly built empire and even ends in the death of his closest advisor, Cleitus (Gary Stretch).

However, neither Alexander nor Commodus could come close to the unbridled decadence of the Persians and their king, Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro),

who is depicted as a literally larger-than-life tyrant bent on the subjugation of all Greece in *300*. The audience's introduction to Xerxes' extravagance is seen in several examples before the king even makes his appearance on screen. Like *Alexander*, *300* uses the exotic nature of Persian dress and various ethnic groups under Xerxes' command to underscore the decadence and otherness of the Persians. The first messenger to arrive in Sparta appears to be of African descent (and thus in marked contrast to the very Anglo-European-looking Spartans), wears golden robes and sports numerous gold piercings in his nose and eyebrows. The next encounter between the Spartans and Xerxes' men occurs when a second messenger approaches the Spartan fortifications at Thermopylae. This emissary is also marked as "exotic" by his fine Persian robes, olive complexion (this time replete with eyeliner/shadow) but most importantly through his very arrival atop a large golden throne carried on the backs of several slaves. The throne and use of slaves obviously indicates not only Persian decadence but also that such luxuries are quite literally obtained via the enslavement of others.

Yet these Persian messengers are dwarfed in their excess by the arrival of Xerxes upon an impossibly massive golden throne which sports ornamental bulls and a long, descending staircase. Not only are dozens of slaves tasked with transporting the throne, but several are made to grovel as literal steps for Xerxes to walk upon as he descends to the ground. Xerxes' extravagance is on further display in his private tent, which provides a Persian version of the typical cinematic Roman orgy. As part of his plan to convince the hunchback, Ephialtes (Andrew Tiernan), to betray the Spartans, Xerxes has him conducted into his tent where all sorts of sexual delights are on parade. Ephialtes witnesses a bizarre sexual scene that includes mutilated and disfigured women bound or perhaps sewn together and kissing, amputees in various stages of ecstasy, numerous bare-breasted and erotically-pierced women and even a goat-headed man to give it the full Bacchanalian treatment. Of course, it is not the sexuality itself that is necessarily wrong, but indulging in it and giving in to one's baser desire for pleasure results in the betrayal and ultimate defeat of the brave Spartans. Moreover, as Xerxes is portrayed as the ultimate master over all his slaves, the film gives the impression that the providers of such sensuality in the tent are themselves forced to perform in this manner for the mighty king, so that their very seductiveness and pleasure is neither genuine nor of their own volition. This scene of aberrant eroticism is thus nothing more than a façade meant to hide the true corruption underneath his empire.

Another form of decadence inherited from the previous era of film is the presence of spectacle, usually in the form of gladiatorial games, or at least some showcase of armed combat. Fighting in general (for example between

Achilles [Brad Pitt] and Hector [Eric Bana] in *Troy*) is not always a direct symbol of corruption and decadence, but gladiatorial combat in other films most definitely is, because the usual and expected portrayal requires the use of slaves, highlights the bloodlust of the spectators and results in senseless death and violence that serves as entertainment only. The notion of gladiatorial games had become such an ingrained and expected motif that virtually the entire plot of Scott's *Gladiator* hinged around the concept, hence the title. The games in *Gladiator* revive many of the set pieces of earlier films, from the vast arena and cheering crowds, to the use of tigers as a ploy to bring Maximus down, even to the inclusion of exotic Amazons riding chariots and slaying their opponents. Moreover, Commodus himself is present at all the games, sitting under an imperial canopy right at the center of all the action, much like his cinematic predecessors. His presence at the games as a sign of corruption is highlighted in the film by contrasting his patronage with his more stoic, upright father's outright ban of gladiatorial fights. Since Aurelius was portrayed as a wise and moral man who detested the barbarity of the games, Commodus's excessive promotion of them, to the financial detriment of the empire, proves that he is indeed the ethical opposite.

Although gladiatorial games as a sign of decadence and decline were notably absent from the films set in Greece (*Troy*, *Alexander*, *300*) and rightfully so since their inclusion would have been wildly anachronistic even by Hollywood's loose interpretation of history, they did see a resurgence in BBC–HBO's *Rome* (2005–2007) and STARZ's *Spartacus* (2010–2013) series, and a handful of the more recent epics since 2011. In *Rome*, the games are not a central focus of the overall narrative of the late Republic, but the two brief instances of their appearance indicate that they still represent the decadent desire for spectacle. The first example (S1:Ep.2) occurs during an informal meeting between Pompey (Kenneth Cranham) and Cicero (David Bamber), where Pompey lays out his plan to have the Senate declare Julius Caesar an enemy of Rome. The catch is that Pompey expects the tribune, Mark Antony, to veto the measure, making the whole exercise mere political theatrics to show Caesar that he lacks any support. The juxtaposition of the conversation with the albeit muted gladiatorial fighting in the small arena below them indicates that the supposedly high-minded political struggles in Rome are themselves nothing more than an amusing spectacle just like the fight before them. The second example of gladiatorial spectacle (S1:Ep11) occurs when the former legionnaire, Titus Pullo (Ray Stevenson) is condemned to death in the arena for murder. This scene has several of the hallmark traits including the bloodthirsty crowd and multiple gladiators. As is customary in such scenes, the formerly hostile crowd begins to side with Pullo after he swiftly and gratuitously dispatches his erstwhile executioners,

indicating that public opinion in Rome is fickle and can be swayed by successful bloodsport, even by a convicted murderer.

Naturally, almost the entire plot of the *Spartacus* series revolves around the corrupt Romans and their obsession with both slaves and gladiatorial combat. In the series, slaves are a central component and an outward sign of the wealth and prestige of upwardly mobile Romans. Thus for the *lanista* (gladiatorial school owner), Batiatus (John Hannah), his purchase and training of numerous slaves to fight as gladiators is his means to improve his social and political standing. The school itself is also a definitive expression of Roman greed and decadence, not only because of their ownership of other humans, but also because of the vile and callous way most of those slaves are figuratively consumed by their Roman masters, either in the arena, in the bedroom, or both. In his attempts to advance his political career, Batiatus spares neither expense nor slave if it will help him achieve his goal in any way. Thus one of the central plot points in the series, the desire of Spartacus (Andy Whitfield) to regain his freedom and reunite with his wife Sura (Erin Cummings) is exploited by Batiatus by convincing the slave to excel in his gladiatorial training to win his favor, his freedom and his wife. Of course, since the Romans in this series are duplicitous and because Spartacus is too valuable of an asset to simply allow him to leave, Batiatus cravenly orchestrates Sura's death so that he can continue to keep Spartacus under his control and thus continue to profit from him. Batiatus's treachery ultimately comes back to haunt him as its discovery leads to a massive gladiator revolt and his own death at the hands of Spartacus. Yet the stakes are even higher in the subsequent seasons, since the Romans' obsession with slavery, spectacle and luxury lead to a perfect storm of unrest that nearly topples the Republic itself.

Even the recent Roman film, Kevin Macdonald's *The Eagle* (2011), likewise contains a critical scene that relies on the audience's expectation of gladiatorial combat, with all of its decadent and negative connotations, that establishes the moral character of the protagonist, Marcus Aquila (Channing Tatum). Wounded in battle and forced into early retirement from the imperial army, a glum Marcus is taken by his uncle to a gladiatorial match for some entertainment and to improve his spirits. The assumption of this scene is that every Roman enjoys brutal spectacle by default, and it is seemingly proven by the boisterous men and women in the crowd cheering the violence and bloodshed before them. Yet, from the beginning, Marcus is uncomfortable with the violence, as well as the people's desire for blood. When a British slave, Esca (Jamie Bell) is thrown into the arena but refuses to fight, the crowd cheers as he is beaten again and again by the masked gladiator. After knocking Esca to the ground, the gladiator places his sword

over Esca's heart and looks to the crowd for guidance. Immediately they begin chanting "Kill him!" while making the "thumbs down" gesture so typical of arena scenes. Instead, Marcus stands, raises his thumb up, and yells for the crowd to spare Esca, which they do. By showing this scene of spectacle, even in some far off British province, *The Eagle* highlights the usual and expected decadence of the Romans through their obsession with bloodsports, while alternately emphasizing the moral integrity of Marcus and his core values that are better than that of his Roman brethren.

Moral Deviance

The deviant nature of Roman (and to a lesser extent, Greek and Eastern) society is another common trope that is typically expressed through scenes that highlight the immoral behaviors of key characters. The relatively short run-time of films has often meant that writers and directors have to rely on clichés to indicate a character was the antagonist and often reflects social constructs prevalent at the time. One of the quickest and easiest ways to accomplish this characterization is to indicate a once criminally "deviant" sexuality, like homosexuality, through clothing, speech, or the character's companions. For male antagonists, such as Nero or Caligula, the films also tend to emasculate them as "effeminate and extravagant" in stark contrast to the thoroughly masculine, heterosexual male protagonists (Fredrick 2008: 215). This core character "flaw" therefore taints everything the antagonist does and in many cases implies that this moral deviance is in fact the source of all their corrupt actions. Thus the corrupt nature of decadent courtly life in the Empire or the sadism of the gladiatorial games is seen as a direct outgrowth of their inner moral depravity.

In order for the feminization of the antagonists to work compellingly, it is typically contrasted with the "positive," even hyper-, masculinity of the male protagonists, which establishes them as a heroic check on the villains. This portrayal is accomplished by appealing to and establishing a normative sense of masculinity which typically emphasizes the protagonist's heterosexuality and heroism via a strong body type, virtuous deeds, moral fortitude and other hetero-performative tropes (Pierce 2011: 41–42). Many of the pre-*Gladiator* films have physically strong and tough male leads, most of whom are soldiers, gladiators, or both. Marcus from *The Sign of the Cross*, Marcus Vinicius (Robert Taylor) from *Quo Vadis*, Marcellus (Richard Burton) from *The Robe*, Demetrius (Victor Mature) from *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, Mark Antony from *Cleopatra* and Livius (Stephen Boyd) from *Fall of the Roman Empire* were all soldiers (including brief stints as gladiators by

Vinicius and Demetrius), while Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) was a gladiator who became a general. Likewise, after 2000, most of the male leads were also soldiers and/or gladiators, including Maximus, Achilles and Hector from *Troy*, Leonidas (Gerard Butler) of *300*, a host of characters from *Rome* (Antony,Vorenus, Pullo), Spartacus from the STARZ series, Quintas Dias (Michael Fassbender) from *Centurion* (2010) and Marcus Aquila from *The Eagle*. All of these men display strong, athletic bodies and are immensely successful in battles that demonstrate their physical prowess. Especially in the post-*Gladiator* period, the display of idealized and often nearly-naked masculine bodies became standard fare, seen first in *Troy* and *300* and especially in the *Spartacus* series.

Male protagonists were likewise depicted as virtuous, restrained and morally upright family men. In fact, the relationship between the hero and his heterosexual partner was a clear indicator of his values and something which marked him off from his antagonist. The plot of most of the earlier films focused on the hero paired with his female love interest and his attempts to reunite with and protect her from the wicked designs of the villain. Many of the revived classical epics take this exact same romantic narrative approach to demonstrate the "good" masculinity of the hero, resulting in pairings such as Maximus and his deceased wife (as well as his chaste and unconsummated love interest in Lucilla), Achilles and Briseis (Rose Byrne), Leonidas and Gorgo (Lena Headey), Spartacus and Sura, and Quintas and Arianne (Imogen Poots). Examples like these showcased the hero's masculinity, his desire to achieve or restore the traditional familial order and above all his heterosexuality.

By contrast, many of the pre-*Gladiator* films rely on the opposite visual and narrative cues to quickly identify the antagonists as "deviant" threats. In *The Sign of the Cross*, the emperor Nero is depicted as a lazy, overly indulgent and likely homosexual villain. The film plays off of homophobic stereotypes to slyly question the emperor's sexuality and therefore his morality by depicting Nero lounging on his throne in silken (and thus feminine) robes and almost always attended by his smooth, fit and virtually naked male servant (usually seen feeding the emperor fruit). While Ustinov's Nero in *Quo Vadis* has no male consort, he nevertheless adheres to the flamboyantly queer stereotype in his primping, his dramatic performances, his colorful and feminine robes and his excessive displays of emotion, all of which lead to widespread destruction in Rome as well as his own downfall. Likewise, in the original *Spartacus*, Laurence Olivier's Crassus, the film's villain whose selfish actions directly lead to the gladiatorial revolt that sweeps through the Republic, indulges in a pampered lifestyle of luxury and debauchery best represented in his attempts to seduce his slave, Antoninus (Tony Curtis).

The infamous "Oysters and Snails" bathing scene where Crassus suggests his "taste" for beautiful young men is not a question of morality is critical for directly connecting his sexual deviance with his villainy. Indeed, the very next scene has Crassus explain that the army marching off in the distance is the might of Rome to which all nations and, with a glance at Antoninus, even boys must submit, implying that Crassus will inevitably have his way with both the slave army and his servant.

Moral deviance as an indicator of corruption and villainy continues in many of the new wave of classical epic films. In addition to the aforementioned luxurious decadence of Commodus, his moral character is clearly compromised throughout the film. Like his cinematic predecessors, Commodus is an example of aberrant masculinity through his feminization, his excessive and often dangerous emotional outbursts and his questionable sexuality. Already introduced in his first scene as ensconced in luxury, this feminization of Commodus continues with his late arrival to the decisive battle against the Germans. Literally juxtaposed with a grimy and bloodied Maximus who had just proven his worth in combat and leadership, Commodus's unsullied and ceremonial armor marks him as insufficiently masculine by comparison. Indeed, Commodus displays little if any martial skills for, even when he fights Maximus in the Colosseum during the finale, he can only do so after mortally wounding him and even then falls to Maximus's superior fighting ability. Moreover, like Ustinov's Nero, Commodus is overly and often uncontrollably emotional, whether it is a conversation with his father about succession, complaining that the Roman people do not love him or threatening Lucilla and her son because of her treacherous plot with Maximus. Commodus's sexuality is also shown to be aberrant through his repeated attempts to consummate an incestuous union with Lucilla, even demanding under threat of violence that she produce an heir with him. Another scene that adds to his criminal deviance occurs when Commodus's face emerges from the shadows and descends, staring, over the sleeping form of his nephew Lucius (Spencer Treat Clark) implying that in addition to incest, Commodus might also be a pedophile, a reading affirmed by Lucilla's shocked reaction when she enters the room. As Monica Cyrino observes, these examples of Commodus's corruption and debauchery "equated oppressive political power with social and sexual deviance" and thus connected "his aberrant desires with his despotic plans for Rome" (2005: 142).

Xerxes in *300* is another antagonist portrayed as a transgressive and morally corrupt character. When Xerxes is first introduced, essentially everything about him is feminized and deviant, with the exception of his toned figure and deep voice. If body hair, especially beards or stubble, is often a sign of masculinity and virility on men such as Leonidas and Maximus, then Xerxes' hairless body

is the antithesis of such masculinity. Coupled with his golden body paint, shaved yet repainted eyebrows, heavy eyeliner, long, manicured nails and multiple gold piercings, bracelets and necklaces, Xerxes can lay no claim to traditional representations of masculinity. The onscreen juxtaposition of a feminized Xerxes with Leonidas's hypermasculinity, seen in his physique, his fighting prowess, his leadership and even the lengthy love-making scene with his wife, further emphasizes the transgressive nature of the Persian king. Moreover, when Xerxes stands behind Leonidas and places his hands seductively on the Spartan's shoulders, it creates a strong homoerotic tension precisely because of Xerxes' feminization (Figure 10.1). When Xerxes is next seen in the aforementioned tent, where Ephialtes is seduced into betraying the Spartans, Xerxes' deviance is further cemented because he is the very one overseeing and condoning the grotesque and corrupting hedonism on display.

Sexual deviance and immorality is exhibited by several other characters across various epics from *Troy* to *Rome*. In *Troy*, the main antagonist, Mycenaean king Agamemnon (Brian Cox), is shown as immoral not only because of his lust for political dominance (discussed below), but also because of his insatiable desire to steal Achilles' war prize, the Trojan priestess Briseis. After receiving Briseis as a sign of his men's respect and convincing her that he means no harm, Achilles returns to his tent to find that Agamemnon has claimed her as his own, leading to a near-fatal confrontation between the king and his godlike warrior. Although there are no connections to homosexuality or pedophilia, the scene highlights several aspects of Agamemnon's personality that makes him very similar to the other corrupt leaders. First, Agamemnon's abduction of Briseis is done sneakily behind Achilles' back, undercutting the latter's heroism. Second, his suggestion that Briseis will

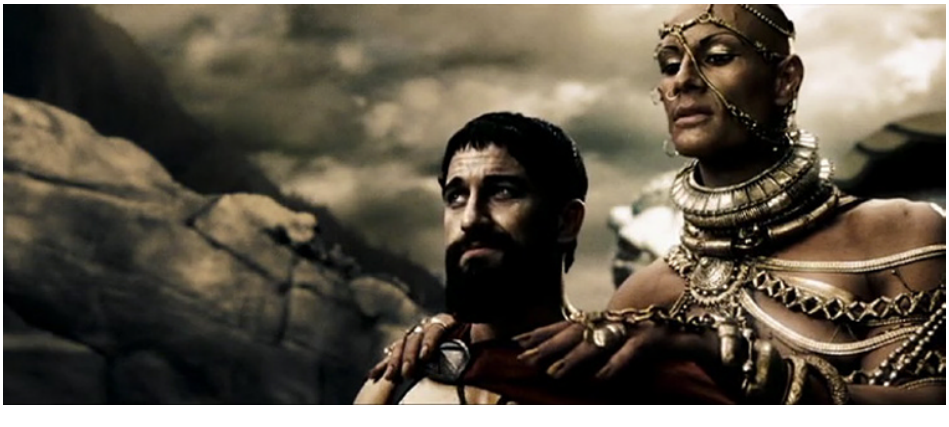

Figure 10.1 Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro) tempts Leonidas (Gerard Butler) with an offer of power in *300* (2006).

become his personal body servant and sex slave differs from Achilles' respectful treatment of her despite her captive status, further indicating Agamemnon's predatory traits. Finally, in the context of conquest, Agamemnon did nothing personally to capture the Trojan beach, yet he received praise from his generals and demanded Achilles' prize as if he had done so. His passive involvement in the battle and his lack of demonstrable fighting prowess together demonstrate his inability to perform as a traditional masculine character, especially in contrast to Achilles. Indeed this feminization of Agamemnon is further enhanced through his means of capturing Troy (the deceptive Trojan Horse) and especially in his treacherous killing of the aged king Priam (Peter O'Toole), whom he dishonorably stabs in the back.

Like many of the epic films, the series *Rome* and *Spartacus* rely on sexual deviance to characterize antagonists and, especially, to critique the Roman social and political elite. In *Rome*, many of the stereotypical sexual deviations are showcased, including incest and sexual violence, in an effort to demonstrate the decadence and moral depravity of those involved, particularly since many of the characters engage in these behaviors to further their own selfish agendas. Although the show did not negatively employ stereotypes of male homosexuality, it did use a lesbian (or at least bisexual) relationship as a symbol of deviance, seduction and treacherous manipulation. As part of her plan to protect the house of Julii during the civil war, Caesar's niece Atia (Polly Walker) sends her daughter Octavia (Kerry Condon) to the house of their rival, Servilia (Lindsay Duncan), to seek protection should Caesar fail. After several meetings that exhibit a growing sexual tension between Octavia and Servilia, upon hearing that her son may be dead, Servilia begins to weep, but is then embraced and kissed by Octavia (S1:E7). When seen again, the two are sleeping in an obvious post-lovemaking embrace. Despite the apparent passion shared between them, it quickly becomes clear that Servilia was simply seducing Octavia to wreak havoc upon her family.

Many aspects of this lesbian affair place it in the category of perceived deviance as it involves an older woman seducing a much younger woman as well as ulterior motives that undercut any genuine emotional attachment. But what enhances the deviant nature of the affair even further is that Servilia uses her emotional and sexual influence over Octavia to gather scandalous information about the possibility of Caesar (Ciarán Hinds) being a pedophile, as part of a rumored tryst with his great-nephew, Octavian (Max Pirkis). Moreover, Servilia encourages Octavia to seduce her brother to get this information, which she dutifully does, only to find out (to the detriment of her mental stability) that the presumed relationship with Caesar never occurred. Interestingly, in addition to the homosexuality (gay and lesbian), seduction, pedophilia and incest, the writers of Rome also find a

way to connect these deviant acts to that other common audience expectation: the orgy. Although it does not occur until the second season, Octavia's presence at an orgy is meant to showcase the depths to which her character has sunk after engaging in many of the above-mentioned activities, reinforcing the notion that all the deviant acts are similar to one another in the realm of moral degeneration. Interestingly, despite the viewer's expectation of orgies among Roman elites, the series only briefly depicts one other instance (in Cleopatra's palace), while the Roman orgy actually serves as part of a redemptive story arc for Octavia "who overcomes the temptations of the corrupt Roman society" (Raucci, 150), making the scene not merely gratuitous.

Though *Rome* was famous for its numerous and explicit sex scenes ("deviant" or not), it pales in comparison to the graphic and frequent coupling in STARZ's *Spartacus*. Indeed, the very first episode of the series contains numerous erotic scenes of love-making, full frontal nudity of women and men (the latter of which is almost unheard of in the world of television and movies) and the requisite orgy scene that includes almost every exotic stereotype: naked women, dancing girls, lesbians fondling, reclining naked Romans fanned by slaves, a shirtless dwarf running around wearing a rhino mask with a penis as the horn, and an overweight senator being fed grapes by naked women. In fact, the *Spartacus* series presents so many scenes of gratuitous sex, both deviant and normative, that there are far too many to discuss in detail and thus this brief survey will have to do. Like *Rome*, *Spartacus* does not treat all sexual displays as inherently deviant and a sign of corruption. In fact, the critical difference between positive and negative sex is the issue of consent and affection. Although copious amounts of explicit copulation occur between various characters, if the act is mutual and consenting, it is treated positively. Thus the sex between Spartacus and Sura, Crixus (Manu Bennett) and Naevia (Lesley-Ann Brant), or Gannicus (Dustin Clare) and Saxa (Ellen Hollman) is presented as affectionate love-making. The critical component here is that the affection is between equals (they are all slaves) and consensual. In fact, virtually all love-making between slaves, when done of their own volition, is presented as normative and positive. By contrast, virtually all sex featuring Romans (either amongst themselves or especially when it involved slaves) is seen as deviant and immoral, either because of lack of consent or the use or threat of force, and in most cases simply because it satisfies the Romans' carnal and base desires. In these cases, sex occurs because of the imbalance of power and the lack of agency on the part of the slaves, both men and women.

Spartacus contains numerous examples of non-consensual sex between Romans and their slaves, exemplifying Roman deviance and depravity.

Throughout the first season Lucretia (Lucy Lawless), the wife of Batiatus, constantly summons the champion, Crixus, to her chambers for adulterous sex, even becoming pregnant by him. As a slave and a gladiator, Crixus has no agency in the matter and must submit to Lucretia, even as he longs to be with his true love, Naevia. In the second season, *Gods of the Arena*, after being ordered to serve the needs of Batiatus's patron, Varus (Peter Feeney), the champion Gannicus is ordered to publicly have sex with fellow slave Melitta (Marisa Ramirez), even though she is the partner of his friend, Oenomaus (Peter Mensah) (S2:E2). This voyeurism and lack of regard for others' relationships is typical of Roman corruption in this series and, in fact, the gladiators are quite frequently ordered to have sex with fellow slaves or even other Romans, typically under the leering gaze of other elites. Although by no means exhaustive, some examples include the gladiator Varro (Jai Courtney) being ordered to demonstrate his sexual prowess with another slave as a spectacle for the Romans; Batiatus taking a female slave from behind as his wife looks on in approval; or Crassus's (Simon Merrells) son, Tiberius (Christian Antidormi), brutally raping the former's slave and love interest, Kore (Jenna Lind) (Figure 10.2).

One of the most brutal examples to clearly demonstrate Roman moral and sexuality depravity occurs when Varus's friend, Cossutius (Jason Hood), visits Lucretia to partake in the illicit pleasures of the House of Batiatus, in this case taking the virginity of a young female slave, Diona (Jessica Grace Smith).

Figure 10.2 Batiatus (John Hannah) sexually assaults a female slave (Laura Surrich) in *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010).

Cossutius decides that Diona's first time will indeed be memorable but wholly unpleasant, as he knowingly chooses the most grimy gladiator, Rhaskos (Ioane King), to ravage her as forcefully as possible. Not content with this humiliation, Cossutius's sadism compels him to anally rape Diona at the same time, leaving her visibly broken and despondent (S2:E3). The brutality of this scene exemplifies the worst traits of deviance among the Romans in *Spartacus*, including exploitation, voyeurism, rape and physical abuse, and functions as the extreme, yet logical, culmination of the moral depravity evidenced by Romans on screen since their earliest cinematic portrayals.

New Directions

Despite the revival of many classical themes and tropes in the new round of epics, there have been several new developments that indicate substantial changes to the traditional narrative, many of which are found in the serialized productions such as *Rome* and *Spartacus*. One change is that sexuality, both positive and negative, is much more visible on screen. Although *Gladiator* was fairly chaste in its visual display of bodies, many of the subsequent epics began to show progressively more skin and became more explicit. For example in *Troy*, Brad Pitt and Orlando Bloom (Paris), and to a lesser degree Eric Bana, were all shown in varying stages of nakedness but not directly engaged in sex, while in *Alexander*, Colin Farrell and Rosario Dawson have a raucous and fully nude consummation of their wedding. Considering the mostly nude (and mostly male) bodies on display in *300*, it was not out of place to have a lengthy bout of intense on-screen matrimonial sex between Gerard Butler and Lena Headey, including a lingering shot of a Butler's toned, and fully nude, backside. As noted, while *Rome* and the *Spartacus* series both had scenes of explicit intercourse (licit and illicit), the STARZ series featured an abundance of group sex, orgy and public intercourse scenes which involved literally dozens of different characters.

Although *Spartacus* is easily the most gratuitous of all the epics, both in terms of sex and violence, it also has the unique status of being the only ancient epic to treat homosexuality as legitimate, proper and on equal footing with heterosexual relationships. As noted, whereas the majority of epics old and new used homosexuality or even the hint of it as a sign of deviance and moral corruption, *Spartacus* has several exclusively homosexual characters who defy the villainous, morally challenged and feminized stereotype. Upon his arrival at the *ludus* (gladiator school), Spartacus meets Barca (Antonio Te Maioha), the Beast of Carthage, who is an exceptionally skilled, very masculine and homosexual gladiator. Interestingly, when Barca's story

is introduced and he is sitting affectionately with his male partner, Pietros (Eka Darville), no mention is made of his sexual orientation, nor do any of the gladiators care. Barca's sexuality is a complete non-issue for all involved including, by extension, the audience. Although Barca is murdered in the first season, it is in no way connected to his sexual orientation (and thus not a moral punishment for being gay) and, in fact, due to his popularity, his character was brought back for the prequel series, *Gods of the Arena*. Just as important, Barca was not a token character to symbolize sexual diversity, since the subsequent two seasons showcased another homosexual couple, Agron (Daniel Feuerriegel) and Nasir (Pana Hema Taylor) who received significantly more screen time and character development and were likewise central to the overall narrative. In short, *Spartacus* defied the traditional negative use of homosexuality as a stand-in for deviance and, instead, created compelling, realistic and three-dimensional gay characters that were integral, instead of aberrant.

Another similar change in these two series was the expanded roles, characterization and agency of female characters. Many of the pre-*Gladiator* epics were a product of their time and presented very limited and often one-dimensional female characters whose function was often simply as an object of desire for the male lead. Thus characters like Mercia, Lygia and Varinia were portrayed as pure, innocent and often in dire need of rescuing by the male hero, acting with little agency. This trend continues to some extent in the modern era, as characters such as Lucilla, Helen, Andromache and Roxane have very little active effect on the storyline, taking a cinematic backseat to a narrative dominated by and focused on the male leads. Even Queen Gorgo of *300*, whose character has an expanded and more active role compared with the graphic novel on which it was based, still has significantly less screen time than her male counterparts.

Yet *Rome* and *Spartacus* would be vastly different without the significant and critical roles played by female characters. In *Rome*, Atia's political maneuverings to gain favor for her family create alliances between powerful men like Caesar and Brutus but likewise turned Servilia down the path of murder. By seeking revenge on Atia for her disrespect towards her, Servilia becomes a key conspirator in the plot to assassinate Caesar, thus helping bring about the fall of the Republic. Niobe wields considerable power and influence in her household, which she managed while her husband Vorenus was away in Gaul for years on end. Additionally, her marital indiscretions during his absence end up inadvertently distracting Vorenus precisely when his presence might have averted the assassination of Caesar. Similarly in *Spartacus*, although lacking direct political power, women like Lucretia and Ilithyia are able to wield influence via their family names. For

example, Lucretia is able to secure her husband's fortunes in the prestigious gladiatorial games by entertaining (and enticing) powerful men like Varus. In similar fashion Ilithyia is able to convince her husband Glaber to change his war plans and abandon Thrace (Spartacus's homeland) in the pilot episode, an event which sets virtually the entire narrative arc of the series in motion.

Even among the slaves, several women have roles that are significant and influential. Initially Lucretia's personal slave, Naevia transforms from a mild and tender domestic servant into a formidable fighter who can defeat other, male gladiators (she brutally slays the former gladiator Ashur in single combat) and in the final battle between Crassus and Spartacus Naevia plays a critical role in delaying Roman soldiers so that weak and wounded slaves can escape. Mira (Katrina Law) is another of Lucretia's personal slaves who starts off docile, but ends up being one of the key conspirators in the initial slave revolt by killing a guard and allowing the rebel gladiators into the *ludus* to kill their Roman masters. Mira's importance continues as she fights alongside Spartacus and even saves him from a Roman trap by convincing him that the slave rebellion is about something bigger than his own personal vengeance. In this way, both *Rome* and *Spartacus* avoided the simplistic and passive roles usually afforded women in classical epics, instead producing a variety of female characters as influential and multifaceted as their male counterparts.

Conclusion

Classical epics since *Gladiator* have often revived many of the traditional themes found in some of the earliest films in the genre. Many of these resuscitated themes are convenient and expected methods by which audiences can place the story they are watching in a moral context. Thus emperors and kings are portrayed as leading decadent and luxurious lifestyles, which is an outward sign of their political corruption. Their wicked and oppressive rule is also compounded by their significant moral deviance, which poses a clear and present threat to the story's protagonist and society as a whole. This depravity also provides a convenient backdrop for the epic to moralize about proper governance and individual virtue, typically expressed through the humble and sincere values of the protagonist. Despite these thematic similarities between many of the previous and current epics, episodic productions such as *Rome* and *Spartacus* have delved into new territory by creating elaborate and active roles for female characters as well as providing a neutral setting for nuanced depictions of sexual orientation. Such changes indicate that the narrative of the classical epic will continue to evolve.

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FURTHER READING

One of the most exhaustive works to cover pre-2000 ancient cinema is still Solomon (2001), while Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) offer a more recent analysis of ten films set in ancient Greece and Rome. For a detailed and thoughtful analysis of nine significant Roman films up through *Gladiator*, see Cyrino (2005a). Several studies analyze the classical world in popular culture including the essays edited by Joshel, Malamud and McGuire (2001) and Lowe and Shahabudin (2009). Nisbet (2006) analyzes the difficulties inherent in representing ancient Greece in popular culture, while Theodorakopoulos (2010) explores how Hollywood has created a popular Roman narrative based on spectacle. Paul (2013) provides an in-depth analysis of the classical epic tradition on screen. For critical essays on *Rome*, see the volumes edited by Cyrino (2008 and 2015); for *STARZ Spartacus*, see Augoustakis and Cyrino (2016). For individual films, see the collection of essays on *Gladiator* (Winkler 2005), *Troy* (Winkler 2007) and *Alexander* (Cartledge and Greenland 2010). On the return of epic film, see the collection of essays in Elliott (2014). Representations of masculinity are analyzed in the edited volume of Cornelius (2011). For a detailed analysis of classical representation of love and sexuality in film and television, see the essays edited by Cyrino (2013).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Franco Rossi's Adaptations of the Classics

Arthur J. Pomeroy

From 1968 to 1985, the Italian director Franco Rossi produced three television adaptations of canonical epics of Greek, Roman, and Polish literature (*Odissea* [eight episodes, 1968], *Eneide* [six episodes, 1971], *Quo Vadis* [six episodes, 1985]). These were screened internationally and well-received by critics and viewers. Today they are far less known, since only *Quo Vadis* is easily accessible in multi-lingual form on DVD, while *Odissea* can only be obtained on DVD with an Italian soundtrack, and *Eneide*, which is regularly repeated on Italian television, has never been available for purchase in legitimate form. Still, Valerio Massimo Manfredi, the author of a best-selling series of novels on Odysseus, in a television interview has described *Odissea* as a *capolavoro*, and the novelist Steven Saylor on his website lists Rossi as "one of the great visionary filmmakers of the Ancient World." Few scholarly studies of these series exist: a pair of articles by Martin Winkler (2007, 2013), particularly on the women in the adaptations of the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, a short section on *Odissea* in Pomeroy (2008) and Pischel (2012), and the inclusion of Rossi's *Quo Vadis* in Ruth Scodel and Anja Bettenworth's examination of film and television adaptations of Sienkiewicz's novel (2009). Still, the three series are well worth scrutinising for what they reveal about the possibilities of translating classical texts to the screen and what they show about the intellectual and economic milieu within which they were produced.

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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Franco Rossi

Franco Rossi (1919–2000) was born in Florence, but spent most of his working life in Rome, where he became friends with another outsider, Federico Fellini from Rimini. Although he was involved in some film activities before the war, Rossi was mainly engaged in radio work after the cessation of hostilities and this experience in sound recording led to him becoming Fellini's dubbing director through the 1950s (Sanguinetti and Di Cola 2005). During this period, he made his first films, most notable being *Amici per la pelle* ('The Woman in the Painting', 1955), a story of youth that reflects one of Rossi's favorite themes (Pellizzari 2000), be it Telemachus's development in *Odissea*, the childhood of Jesus in *Un bambino di nome Gesù* (1987), or, in his last television production, the suffering of children in the Bosnian War, *Michele alla guerra* (1994). In 1959 he directed *Morte di un amico*, set among the pimps and prostitutes on the margins of Roman society, from a script written by his friend, Pier Paolo Pasolini. The hyper-neorealist themes of the film pre-date Pasolini's own treatment of similar subject matter in *Accatone* (1961). Rossi's next films were in the style of Antonioni and Visconti, but differ most notably in his desire to film outside Italy. *Odissea nuda* (1961) portrays a television director who is seduced by the lifestyle of Polynesia. The film predates the *Mondo carne* genre in its use of exotic settings, which Rossi would return to in *Una rosa per tutti* ('A Rose for Everyone', 1967), set in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, with Claudia Cardinale as the eponymous Rosa. Filmed outside Italy, but with the sensibility of an Italian confused by the modernism of Los Angeles, *Smog* (1962) was initially denounced as anti-American, but it now recognized as one of the finest films about the city: "Rossi's depiction of Los Angeles is unique, devoid of sensationalism, and true to the city's eclectic mix of landscapes, cultures, social strata, and peculiar vocations" (Getty Center program notes, 2013).

It may be Rossi's experience in working in overseas locations, as well as his substantial reputation, that led to Dino de Laurentiis producing his three major television series, with financial support from RAI (the public television company in Italy) and a consortium of Yugoslav, French, and German companies. These were clearly seen as prestige productions, involving major non-Italian actors (for example, the ethnically Albanian Yugoslav Bekim Fehmiu as Odysseus; the Greek actresses Irene Papas and Olga Karlatos as Penelope and Dido; Austrian Klaus Maria Brandauer as Nero, American Frederic Forrest as Petronius, and the notable Swedish actor, Max von Sydow, as Peter in *Quo Vadis*). The regular process through to the 1970s in Italian

film-making of dubbing all voices allowed this mix of actors without creating the dreaded "Europudding" effect of more recent productions. Rossi's own keen ear for sound as a dubbing director undoubtedly contributed through the use of voice-over and choice of shot. While the use of Yugoslavia for external locations in *Odissea* and *Eneide* can be explained by the reduced cost of using local labor, Rossi's decision to film the Carthage sequences of the *Aeneid* at Barmyan in Afghanistan shows an interest in the ethnography of the third world. This he shares with Pasolini, who had used locations at Aleppo, Syria and in Cappadocia, Turkey in his *Medea* (1969), and with his fellow Florentine, Valerio Zurlini, who would film *The Desert of the Tartars* (1976) at the fortress of Bam in Iran. Rossi appears to have enjoyed the freedom that distant locations offered: as Morando Morandini (2001: 50) notes, "for Rossi and wandering film-makers of the period (especially in documentaries), the voyage is an escape from oneself and one's environment where one feels like a displaced person."

Aside from the use of exotic locations that have only recently come to be typical for high-cost television blockbuster series such as *Game of Thrones*, the production values for Rossi's television series were remarkable for the period. *Odissea* was filmed in color, although it was only broadcast in black and white to its Italian audience of sixteen million viewers, and in each episode some lines of the Homeric epic were read in a voice-over by the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti. Direction for the Polyphemus episode was delegated to Mario Bava, whose skill in trick photography and experience in filming gothic horror are very much to the fore in scenes that surpass the depictions by Mario Camerini (*Ulysses* [1954]) or Andrei Konchalovsky in the HBO production of 1997. The director of photography for *Eneide* was the great Vittorio Storaro (*Apocalypse Now, The Last Emperor, Reds*), while the set design and costumes for all three series were the work of Luciano Ricceri. Among the writers with whom Rossi regularly worked were Vittorio Bonicelli (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* [1970]) and Ennio De Concini, who had paved the way for the stream of peplum films with *Hercules* (1958) and *Hercules Unchained* (1959), but had also gained an Academy Award for his script for *Divorce Italian Style* (1961). For *Eneide,* the soundtrack was provided by Mario Nascimbene, well-known for his contributions to major Hollywood productions as well as Italian film, and featured a striking theme ("Dido's Lament") sung by the actor playing Dido, Olga Karlatos. In brief, although there are enough consistent features of Rossi's productions to justify describing him as a cinematic *auteur*, the contributions of others who worked on the productions should not be underestimated.

Adaptation: The *Aeneid*

When literature is adapted to the stage or screen, certain changes are common. The story may well be told by visual images rather than dialogue. Voice over is generally regarded as undesirable as over-explicatory, but may be essential in linking scenes or giving a narratorial presence (for instance in introducing flashbacks, viewing the past from a future perspective of greater knowledge or even self irony). Written text on the screen has been generally avoided as reflecting story with photographic illustration, a style typical of early cinema, but has survived in epic film as a genre marker at the outset (see *Spartacus* [1960], *Fall of the Roman Empire* [1964], or the first *Star Wars* film [1977]). Because of the need for compression, episodes in the written text may be reordered or excised and characters removed or amalgamated.

Comparison between *The Legend of Aeneas* (dir. Giorgio Venturini, 1962) and Rossi's *Eneide* will highlight differing approaches to retelling Virgil's *Aeneid* for a modern audience. Venturini's film was made at the height of the peplum stream of movies, usually with limited budgets, produced by Italian studios between 1958 and 1965. It is a sequel of sorts to *The Trojan Horse* (dir. Giorgio Ferroni, 1961), a version of the Trojan War story that set Aeneas, not Achilles or Hector, as the principal character. Both scripts were by Ugo Liberatori, best known for writing the script for *The 300 Spartans* (1962), the film which inspired the Frank Miller graphic novel that would be turned into *300* (2006). The lead role was played by Steve Reeves, the American bodybuilder whose performances in *Hercules* (1958) and *Hercules Unchained* (1959) had popularized the mix of historical and mythological adventure films that were to take their name from the short skirts worn by the male actors when they were labeled by French critics as peplums. Although the genre is normally considered low art and often parodied, *The Legend of Aeneas* and *The Fury of Achilles* from the same year, the latter closer to Homer's *Iliad* than *Helen of Troy* (1956) or *Troy* (2004), show a deliberate choice of avoiding the comic entertainment of traditional peplums and embrace high literature. The casting of bodybuilders in the lead roles (Gordon Mitchell plays Achilles in *Fury*) is no longer indicative of physical strength, as, for instance, displayed by the semi-divine Hercules, but a sign of the strength of leadership as provided by idealized American males. Since the United States had long been the promised land for Italian migrants, and American forces had played a significant role in the liberation of Italy and after, Reeves embodied all the star qualities that Italian audiences desired.

Rather than try to incorporate all the wanderings of Aeneas and his unhappy romance with Dido, *The Legend of Aeneas* begins with the arrival of

the Trojans in Italy and follows their struggle to set up their own settlement in a new land. Indeed, it opens with a scene showing a long line of refugees, some of whom appear to be dragging the hull of a ship. Aeneas is clearly the leader, encouraging his followers despite their exhaustion, and using his obvious strength to assist. Welcomed by the locals, the Trojans set up camp in a meadow, but this draws the anger of the Rutulian prince, Turnus, who sees them as trespassing on his land. He attempts to destroy the settlement by stampeding cattle toward the new stockade, but Aeneas manages to turn the herd in a different direction and save the day. When he goes to the palace of the king, Latinus, to confirm the grant of land to the Trojans, he not only meets the ineffectual king, but his domineering queen, Amata, who wishes to marry her daughter to Turnus. While waiting for the king's decision, Aeneas stops in a room decorated by pictures of the Trojan War ("A Greek painted these frescoes for us some years ago"). There he is joined by the king's daughter, Lavinia, who expresses concern that Aeneas may be upset ("It is a painful feeling to be faced with pictures of the past"). Aeneas, however, replies that these are the only memories he has and that with time, "the truth established between victor and vanquished grows into peace." There is no bitterness or hatred any more: the Greeks are no longer his enemies and even in the past he "fought them without hating them … because I loved what I was defending." When Lavinia expresses her surprise at his words, she indicates that she expected "the empty phrases all heroes use. They only believe in force and vengeance."

This version of the *Aeneid* has become a Western, with Aeneas leading a wagon train of settlers to a new life (possibly even recalling the lingering pain of the American Civil War that is a common theme in such films). That he is played by an American, from Montana no less, who is quiet and self-effacing, contrasts with the revanchism of Italian politics after the First World War and the memory of Mussolini. Aeneas will not be run off the land he has been granted: when in the same room, with pointed reference to the Trojan Horse, Turnus later warns him to "leave town by sunrise" or else he may find himself not on the land, but under it, he ignores the Rutulian's bluster. Eventually the war between the Trojans and the Latins that Turnus has created by his manipulations is solved by an ending typical for the Western: the man-to-man duel that leaves only the hero standing. Aeneas returns to his people the victor and an epilogue shows the subsequent birth of Rome and its rise to a great empire. The film concludes with a shot of the model of Rome in the Museo della civiltà romana, presumably intended to reflect the path to urbanization that American settlement of the West followed, although it also unintentionally recalls the imperial ideals of the Fascism embodied in the museum and its exhibits.

More could be said about the adaptation of the *Aeneid* in *Legend* (for instance, how the contests of the funerary games in *Aeneid* 5 are transferred to Latium as festival contests that both display the skill and nobility of Aeneas and the dishonesty of Turnus). The amalgam of Greek epic and cowboy film would soon be made even clearer in Duccio Tessari's *Return of Ringo* (1965), based on the homecoming of Ulysses in the *Odyssey*. However, most significant for this study is the use of the scene where Aeneas views the frescoes in the temple of Juno at Carthage from *Aeneid* 1.450–493. The depictions of combat, inevitably concluding with Greek victories, are an odd source of comfort to the hero, especially as they are painted in the temple of Juno, the divinity most hostile to the Trojan race. Aeneas's isolation as sole survivor of the Trojan heroes is here underlined. His reverie is interrupted by the arrival of Dido and the suppliant survivors of the storm that has wrecked the Trojan fleet. The queen's gracious reception of these castaways encourages Aeneas to reveal himself and, in response to Dido's questioning, recall his travails since the fall of Troy. While *Legend* substitutes Lavinia for Dido in the parallel scene (and later contrasts her reaction with that of Turnus), it also highlights a significant change. What is not included in Virgil's painting is the famous Trojan Horse—perhaps because this episode will be described in depth in *Aeneid* 2 or even because Aeneas is himself the intruder who will lead to Carthage's eventual downfall. Reeves' subsequent suggestion of an amnesty after the Trojan War is an apparent rejection of the heroic code, yet only serves to show the necessity of his later recourse to violence in defense of his people. It may also recall the Italian reaction to defeat in the Second World War: Italian resistance to the Allies was heroic, but out of defeat came renewal.

Rossi's *Eneide* begins with gold titles on a burgundy background announcing the program as a prestige production, but then changes to documentary mode with a pastoral scene and a narrator indicating that this was the home of a tiny Bronze Age tribe of Indo-European origins, the Latins in the Alban Hills near the Tiber. Their religious and social center appears to have been Laurentum and at some stage they adopted the legend that they were an amalgam of native peoples and settlers from the East, specifically Trojans led by Aeneas. This was the story that Virgil turned into his epic, tracing the origins of the Roman peoples to this isolated and peaceful settlement. The scene then turns to a child being dipped in the Tiber, a dedication to the local divinities that resembles a baptism, but with king Latinus and his attendants dressed in robes whose green colors indicate a vegetation ritual. Not only do they not appear in classical Greco-Roman costume—it is, after all the Bronze Age in Italy—but the Latins have masks that are derived from those worn by the Mud Men of New Guinea (Kirk 1969; Otto and Verloop 1996).

Latinus returns to his palace, constructed of wooden columns bound together, and hangs a jar of river water on the sacred laurel tree to signify the rebirth of life. When this transforms into a beehive, this is taken as a sign that a queen will return (clearly a reference to Latinus's only heir, his daughter Lavinia), but the arrival of the bees from outside the palace and a sign from the flames on the altar, shooting up when Lavinia sets on the throne, something she has never done before, impel Latinus to consult his father, the seer Faunus. That night Faunus delivers an oracle, that Lavinia should not be married to anyone other than a stranger from over the seas, one whose city has been burnt down, and who will spill Italian blood. The scene immediately cuts to Troy in flames and a man searching among the bodies afterward—the foreigner, Aeneas, who is next seen leading a tiny band of survivors away from the city, while the first seven lines of Virgil's *Aeneid* in Latin are provided by a voiceover. A depiction of crashing waves follows, persisting through the true credits for the series while Dido's lament, here with a male chorus, plays in the background. Virgil's words, *multum ille et terris iactatus et alto* ("so often tossed around on land and sea"), are clearly being reproduced in the images.

Within this ten minute prologue, Rossi displays not only the major narrative theme of the *Aeneid* (Aeneas's wanderings and his arrival in Italy), but also the changes he will be making to the depiction of events. The marriage of Lavinia (to whom is not explicitly indicated: it might be to Ascanius, rather than his father) will unify the two peoples, but is not depicted as part of a divine plan for empire. In showing the animist rituals of the Latins, Rossi is harking back to James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, while the New Guinean link recalls the ethnology that underpins Pasolini's *Medea* (1969). Yet while Pasolini sought to display the superiority of the spiritual practices of the third world in the face of Western colonialism (in line with the writings of Mircea Eliade), the *Eneide* is much more syncretistic, for instance, linking the customs of the Ver Sacer with Christian baptism. The significance of children, seen clustering around Latinus, is clear: these are the future. Furthermore, by starting with the description of Latinus and his people from *Aeneid* 7, 45–101, anticipation of who the stranger may be is increased, adding weight to the hero appearing, finally, on screen. The prophecy of Rome's imperial destiny, clearly delivered in Faunus's prophecy in the *Aeneid* (7.98–101) and revived in Italy in the Fascist period, is excised—Rossi, whose early life roughly corresponds with the *vent'anni neri* and was later involved in the Italian resistance, fully recognized the failure of that dream. The Virgilian motifs of fire and water are given a visual setting, but, contrary to many recent miniseries, violence is not the source of entertainment but an obstacle to be overcome.

Finally the waves shown during the credits are seen breaking on a shore, where survivors of a shipwrecked fleet are hauling themselves onto the beach. A young man, revealed as Ascanius, asks another who seems to be a leader (Palinurus) where his father is. No one knows and the tiny band is depicted as close to collapse with everyone looking out for themselves: finally, they huddle around a fire for warmth while a roll call of the absent is slowly called out ("Iloneus—missing; Aletes—missing .... Aeneas—missing"). The surviving branch of the Trojan stock is threatened with extinction after a winter's storm has cast them up on the coast of Africa and the hopes of Aeneas to lead his people to Latium appear to have been extinguished. The darkness of despair (a deliberate use of light that shows the hand of Storaro, the cinematographer) gives way to a new day and the sight of Aeneas, alone on a rock shore, questioning why his mother always plays games with him and never allows him to see her. A dark-robed female figure, visible to the audience but not to her son, observes from his clothing that he is a stranger in this land and tells him that he should cross the mountains into the country of the Phoenicians. Only when he begins his descent into the valley on the other side does she reveal that she is indeed Venus, his mother, but it is clear that he can only see her in the shape of a bird. In this sequence, Rossi shows some typical treatments of its source: in line with the *Odyssey*, Virgil's inspiration for these scenes, Aeneas has been separated from his people which both increases the audience's sympathy for the lonely hero and its appreciation of the burdens that leadership impose on him. The roll-call of the lost (from *Aeneid* 1.120–122) is conflated with Aeneas's own uncertainty about the fate of his followers (2.220–222) and transferred to the group that has gone missing and appears before Dido later in *Aeneid* 1. Even more striking is the portrayal of the gods. The Greco-Roman divinities are usually omitted or unseen in cinema. The difficulty of portraying the gods is one of the problems to be faced in filming the *Odyssey* that causes friction between the producer and director in Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963). Thetis is the only divine character to appear in *The Fury of Achilles* (1962) and its descendant, Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004). More often, the role of the gods is simply ignored—they simply do not exist in *The Legend of Aeneas*. Rossi offers his own solution: where the gods have assumed human form, such as Athena as Mentes in the opening of the *Odyssey* or Venus as a local woman (changed from her huntress form in the *Aeneid*), they are clearly visible; however, in the *Aeneid*, the characters can only sometimes recognize a divine presence without actually seeing the majesty of the godhead. Marked as strange by their elaborate attire (and so quite different from classical depictions of the divine), the goddesses of *Eneide* observe and play games with humans that are beyond their understanding.

In the next valley, Aeneas sees strange figures that have been constructed and laborers hard at work (Venus appropriates Aeneas's own line: "Oh fortunate folk, whose city walls are now rising"). The scene is Barmyan, with its famous rock Buddhas providing extra pathos for the modern viewer. Whereas Pasolini used Cappadocia to depict the foreignness of Colchis and contrasted primitive social cohesion with the predations of Western intruders in his *Medea*, Rossi is using the exotic setting to destroy audience anticipation of how Carthage and its inhabitants should seem. These are not Semitic hucksters (the typical depiction derived from Fascist racism and Italian imperialism in the twentieth century), but people with their own customs and aspirations, building on the work of earlier people who have long left the site. Venus instructs Aeneas to wait in the temple and ask for hospitality in the name of the (unknown) divinity. When the queen of the Carthaginians appears two days later, she is surrounded by a retinue (as in *Aeneid* 1.496–497, where she is compared to Diana leading the dance of the nymphs), but the laws (cf. the *iura* of *Aeneid* 1.426) she is setting forth are those that sanctify marriage, following the practice of Sychaeus. As Aeneas observes this, he is approached by a woman who announces herself as Anna, the sister of the queen, Dido. On returning to her sister, Anna conjectures that this man must be the leader of the Trojan refugees that have set up camp on the shore and Dido herself goes to inspect the stranger (one may note the now audible birdsong that accompanies her appearance, indicating the presence of divinity). His safety has already been guaranteed in a voiceover exchange between Venus, reciting *Aeneid* 1.229–231 in Latin, and Jupiter, speaking in Italian (avoiding the imperial prophecy of 257–296). However, Dido, rather than recall the guest-friendship which links her family with that of the suppliant, as in the *Aeneid*, recites a lullaby that she has heard from Ascanius, a song about a place without war where the horses run free. "Who is Creusa? Your wife?" Aeneas, without answering, in flashback recalls how his wife used to sing this song and thinks not so much of her fate in the destruction of Troy as the pleas from her ghost that he have the courage to save his people from such suffering again.

There are no temple pictures in Rossi's *Eneide*, but the encounter at the shrine in Carthage both recreates the memories of Troy in Aeneas and gives him hope that he has arrived at a place where there is sympathy for the defeated. This expectation is reinforced by the subsequent recreation in a strange mummers' dance (another nod to Frazer?) of the tragedy of Sychaeus, Elissa and Pygmalion. Aeneas breaks his silence, asks Dido whether she is Elissa, reassured by the discovery of another refugee seeking to make a home for her people in exile. In turn, Dido asks the stranger to identify himself as the hero Aeneas. This is no longer Venus's mocking invitation to Aeneas to

identify himself (*Aeneid* 1.369: *sed vos qui tandem?*), but a recognition of the sufferings and aspirations shared by two humans who have lost their homes. The Trojans on the shore are given protection and Ascanius presents Dido with the gift of Helen's wedding dress. The tragedy to come has been set in motion.

Adaptation: A Persistent Theme

Rossi's version of Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis* makes numerous changes from its source and also from earlier adaptations, most notably the 1951 version (dir. Mervyn LeRoy). Probably from cost considerations, the monumental depiction of the Forum and Nero's palace are replaced with scenes of the often dilapidated buildings in which the general Roman populace lives and interior shots of the luxurious dwellings of the emperor and the senators, most notably Petronius's *domus.* This contrast of high and low is intrinsic to the narrative (the replacement of the old order with the new beliefs of the poor Christians) and is likely to have influenced the set designers for the BBC–HBO *Rome* series (2005–2007). At times, most especially in association with the religious rites practiced at Rome, there are echoes of *Fellini Satyricon* (1969). So, for instance, when Vinicius consults the oracle of Mopsus in Episode One, the underground scene, the unusual costume of the priestess who is the mouthpiece of the god, and semi-grotesques seated in alcoves recall the candle-lit interior scenes of Fellini's film. The oracle's answer ("There is only one name of God. Discover this and love will change your life.") turns out to be true, but the solution (Christianity) is a belief system open to all at any time. Rossi's depictions of its simple adherents meeting in natural spaces reinforce the impression of movement from a dark, atavistic set of beliefs to a new system that is forming through the efforts of the first apostles and setting down of the story of the Christ in this period.[1]

One subtle, but significant change from the novel and other cinematic versions in Rossi's series is the prominence of children. This might be seen as a more realistic depiction of the city ("Over a million, amassed in so small a space" writes Petronius to his nephew). Street urchins would have been a common sight, along with street entertainers, including reciting poets, taken from Juvenal's *Satires,* and children are regularly shown working in the fullers' tanks. However, it turns out that some of them are intermediaries between travelers bringing in smuggled accounts of the teachings of Jesus and the emerging Roman Christian community led by Peter. Vinicius is likewise bringing secret documents, in his case letters from the commander of the Roman forces in the East, Corbulo, to Aulus Plautius. In the latter's houses

he first sees the hostage and adopted daughter Ligia working on a mosaic, accompanied by the children of the household. Unaware of what a nativity scene might be, he mistakes Mary and the divine child for a mythological tale, such as Dido accompanied by the child Eros. The major themes of the series have thus been encapsulated: the political catastrophe of Nero's reign ("Rome has lost the favor of the gods" writes Petronius) and the attempts by the traditional ruling class to restore the status quo through the Pisonian Conspiracy, contrasted with a new, egalitarian, but apolitical system that appeals to youth and the future.

The motif of children is repeated throughout the series. In the first episode, Nero is gambling, while the dice are collected by *pueri delicati* dressed like Cupids, or perhaps more specifically the *putti* of Baroque art. By contrast, when the audience is first introduced to Ursus, Ligia's bodyguard, putting on a show of strength as street entertainment, the donations are collected by small children with wreaths on their heads, but without the artificiality of the children in Nero's palace or the Cupids at the banquet at Petronius's house (Episode 2). Although Nero may be seen with children (as when he arrives at Petronius's house to announce that he is throwing open the Palace and its gardens for those left homeless by the Great Fire [Episode 4] or when he is supported in his performance by a chorus of children before announcing his attention to leave Rome for Greece [Episode 6]), he does not have any emotional attachment to them. When Claudia, his daughter from Poppaea Sabina, dies, he feels no real grief and he actually fears Poppaea's child from an earlier marriage, Rufius. Whether he or Tigellinus is responsible for the smothering of the little boy is left unclear. What is certain is that the emperor lacks any emotional attachment to others. Poppaea Sabina (Cristina Raines) may be a cruel beauty in the imperial palace, a point reinforced when she first appears standing by a loom weaving a costly design (a contrast with Irene Papas's Penelope at the loom at the beginning of *Odissea*), but she has a fierce, if doomed protectiveness for her children. Rossi makes the interesting choice of altering historical details so that Nero's freedwoman Acte sacrifices herself to save Nero from the Pisonian conspirators, while Poppaea, rather than being killed by Nero as in our historical sources, is left alive in an empty palace at the end of series.

The frequency with which children are shown in *Quo Vadis*—they are seen at the start of each episode, excepting the last one which begins with the funeral of Rufius—is clearly linked to the series' theme of change. Nero receives a warning of a transfer of power from the Chaldaean astrologers, which is reinforced by a prodigy of a two-headed calf that Tigellinus shows him in the secrecy of the Mamertine prison. The emperor feels assailed from inside the ruling class (he is aware that some of the senators are plotting against him,

but cannot get direct evidence) and from outside by followers of a new and strange superstition. His fears are increased when the Christians light candles in the shape of a cross as a demonstration against the sentence of death passed on the slaves of the murdered city prefect, Pedanius Secundus. Nero's reaction is to eschew mercy and the entire household is crucified in the woods outside Rome. The eschatological preaching of the Christian, Crispus, treating the fire at Rome as indication of God's wrath on sinners, is then exploited by Tigellinus to incite the hatred of the populace against the Christians. A child is shown stoned to death and the Praetorians carry out a round-up of the followers of Christ. Nero attempts to use the Christians as part of his spectacles, live sacrifices in his production of the *Trojan Women* where he plays the role of Apollo (which only panics the chorus) and live participants in his new pyrodrama (the stench of burning flesh is overpowering). Having dreamed of a great black bull, he arranges for a combat between Ursus and a live bull threatening the life of Ligia. Once again, his attempts to turn life into drama fail: Ursus defeats the bull and it is Tigellinus who orders her release: "Let her go free. No one will ever understand. But we were only trying to defend ourselves."[2]

In brief, Nero and Tigellinus have failed to understand the predictions. There will not be a change of rule in Rome (Rossi makes no mention of the eventual overthrow of Nero, unlike the novel which describes it in an epilogue, and the senatorial attempt at regime change has been a complete failure). Rather, there will be a change in the outlook of those outside power. The children that Peter preaches to are the beginning of this change and Christianity, unlike the Roman aristocracy, will replace itself in each generation. When Peter, at the urging of his followers, leaves Rome for his own safety, he is not met on the Appian Way with the traditional bright light, but by a child who is taking food and drink to his master. It slowly dawns on him that this is his savior, and his question, *Quo vadis, domine?* ("Where are you going, Lord?") leads to his understanding that he must not disown his religion again, but return to Rome to face his fate. In Sienkiewicz's novel (p. 555), Peter takes this to mean: "This city of vanity, debauchery and power was ready to fall into his hands and to become that double capital of both God and man, that would rule the spirit and the flesh throughout the world." Post-Vatican II (and perhaps even post the Lateran Accords), Rossi does not seek a foundation myth for the Papacy, but for a spiritual system, as indicated by Peter's narration of this scene to an audience of children at Rome. The variation between what is portrayed and Peter's version to his congregation also underlines the alternate versions of events in early Christianity. The series ends with the two lovers sailing down the Tiber—a traditional escape from the corruption of Rome as at the conclusion of Bulwer-Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii* or Sienkiewicz's novel.

Yet no destination is clear: the voyage as indicative of a greater story is both referencing the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* and reminiscent of the open ending of *Fellini Satyricon*. The last shot, book-ending the series, is of a child on the river bank reciting the Sermon on the Mount (but not the canonical version of Matthew 7, which, as Peter noted in episode 3, was still in the process of composition): "Blessed are the persecuted. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the seekers of peace, for they shall inherit the earth."

The use of the child motif in a narrative which involves the foundation of Christianity is hardly surprising—Jesus's words "Suffer little children to come unto me" (Matthew 19:14 and Luke 18:16) and the theme of rebirth in the Gospels are ample precedents. However, Rossi had already placed emphasis on the future generations in his *Odissea* and *Eneide*. In *Odissea*, the focus is on Odysseus's family throughout, with substantial roles for Irene Papas as Penelope and the French actor, Renaud Verley, as Telemachus, to complement Bekim Fehmiu's Odysseus. Following the Homeric storyline, Athena in the form of Mentes sets the story in train by visiting Odysseus's palace on Ithaca, where he is hospitably welcomed by Telemachus. Mentes asks his host whether, as would seem from his appearance, he is in fact Telemachus, son of Odysseus. The reply is modelled on *Odyssey* 1.215–216: "My mother says I am his son, but I do not know for sure. For no one can be sure of his father," but changed to "So I am called by my mother, but I have not heard it from my father." This rephrasing prepares the viewer for the recognition scene in Eumaeus's hut, when Odyssey has managed to return home. In Rossi's version, however, it is Eumaeus who slowly becomes aware of the similarity between his two guests (so calling the audience's attention to the familial link). This is a markedly different depiction from that in *Odyssey* 16, where Eumaeus is completely absent when Odysseus reveals himself to his son, but one that visually draws attention to the theme "like father, like son." Likewise, while in Homer Athena as Mentes tells Telemachus to challenge the suitors who are occupying the palace (*Odyssey* 1.269–270), in Rossi's version, the king of the Taphians merely needs to ask "What would your father do about this?" to rouse Telemachus to action. In similar fashion, the nurse Euryclea declares, after Telemachus calls the suitors to the assembly of Ithaca, "Today, I saw in you your father," and supports his plans to leave in secret contrary to her behavior in *Odyssey* 2. Telemachus's journey to Sparta to seek news of his father serves to reinforce the familial ties: seeing the resemblance, Helen describes Odysseus's exploits in the past (his secret entry into and escape from Troy), while Menelaus, first seen being fitted with a funeral mask, can only express his regrets for the Trojan War and its consequences for Greece as a whole. The time of warrior heroes is now past: where Odysseus will succeed is in

reestablishing order in his household and, finally, in Ithaca. Telemachus plays a major role in the action in contrast to the almost complete dominance of Odysseus in Mario Camerini's vehicle for his American star, Kirk Douglas (*Ulysses* [1954]). When the three generations of the family (grandfather Laertes joining them at this point) face the relatives of the suitors, one might expect continuation of the violence. However, in Rossi's version, Odysseus as clan leader accepts the mediation of Athena in the guise of Mentor and is himself the first to lay down his weapons, in notable contrast with *Odyssey* 24. The cycle of killing is halted, Odysseus's son may succeed him as king, and prosperity, such as it might be for Ithaca, is possible.

To adapt the *Aeneid* was a more difficult task, since the epic's predictions of Rome's empire had been used to promote the imperialism of Mussolini's Italy and the dream of the Mediterranean as once again *mare nostrum*. Rossi avoids this by scaling back his story to proportions that are hardly greater than those of a clan. The few scattered survivors of Troy hardly fill a handful of tiny boats in their quest to find a homeland and are in constant danger of losing their coherence on the way. The role of Ascanius in winning the friendship of Dido and her people has already been mentioned. As important as divine instructions for Aeneas's departure from Carthage are the festivities that the Trojans celebrate with the arrival of spring in Africa: these are the rites they maintain as a group, which indicate that they have not assimilated with Dido's people and are prepared to defend themselves from the native Africans under Iarbas. Aeneas, as father of his people, must lead them to safety, whatever his personal wishes may be. Yet even more significant is his narrative of the fall of Troy at Dido's banquet. In *Aeneid* 2, Aeneas seeks to retaliate against the Greeks who are sacking his city and die in the fighting, but is restrained first by the appearance of Venus, then by the pleas of Creusa (2.594–620, 675–678). In *Eneide*, Aeneas's *aristeia* is interrupted when he notices that a group of children have been imprisoned by the Greeks and he pauses to rescue them. The scene is absent from Virgil (it is possibly inspired by the depiction of *Aeneid* 2.766–767 of the Trojan captives: "children and frightened mothers gathered together in a long line"). Rossi then introduces the ghost of Creusa, appealing to the hero to give up his fruitless resistance and instead protect the next generation.

When Aeneas arrives at Sicily (in the television version, for the first time) after leaving Carthage, he sees a bright reflection in the distance and advances alone to explore. He discovers that the light is from the panoply that had been part of Anchises' burial at sea: the Sicilians had found the funereal vessel and constructed a shrine. At the same time he is challenged by the local youths—who turn out to be none other than the rescued children that Aeneas had entrusted to Acestes. It is these young men who will form the backbone

of the expedition of those Trojans whom he will lead to Latium and their promised homeland. Before he departs, Aeneas makes a spiritual journey at the shrine, not the physical journey at Cumae in *Aeneid* 6. Having met the prophet Helenus and Creusa in the form of the Sibyl divining the leaves, he passes through the darkness, where Dido flees from him, and once more comes to the shining light, a version of Elysium where Anchises waits for him in an amalgamation of the scene from *Aeneid* 6 with Aeneas's dream of his father in *Aeneid* 5.724–739. The message he receives is simple: Aeneas must forget the past and set his heart on justice, not revenge. In Italy his efforts will finally lead to *un ragazzo, Cesare Augusto*, the youth who will restore the golden age of Saturn. This is not Anchises' grand panorama of Roman history, with its *hic vir, hic est* of *Aeneid* 6.791–794, the hero Caesar Augustus who will not only usher in a Saturnian age, but also an empire that will extend as far as the Garamantes in the Sahara and the Indians in the East. Rather the reference is to the *iuvenis* of *Eclogues* 1.42 who instructs the farm laborers to "pasture the herds as you have always done and let in the bulls," a depiction of a return to rural calm. One final episode is worth mentioning: on his return from visiting Evander and the site of a future Rome (a rural scene in Yugoslavia, since the modern city would have been most unsuitable), Aeneas stops in a village where a child has recently been born. Invited to join the celebrations (as if at a christening ceremony), he offers some words of benediction, hoping for a time to come when there will be justice and peace and no fear of attacks from the sea or need for walls, when the crops will produce in abundance and the goats will graze amid crimson roses. This is the hope of *Eclogues* 4 on the birth of the marvelous child. The next scene, where Aeneas places his helmet on Pallas's head, however, reminds the viewer that young lives will still be wasted before this utopia can be achieved.

Rossi and Greek and Roman Film Studies

The three miniseries discussed offer a substantial body of work for further exploration: at eighteen hours in total, they provide nearly as much material as the two seasons of BBC–HBO *Rome*. The use of anthropological themes as part of the landscape of *Eneide* calls for a study in its own right. For instance, after Aeneas has undergone his *katabasis*, Misenus is found dead, clutching a branch in his hand, as if fallen from a tree. The myth of the Golden Bough is thus transferred to the sacrificial victim, with Misenus recalling Odysseus's crewman Elpenor, who greets his leader in the Underworld. At the same time, the arrival of the Trojans is portrayed as the influx of Iron Age peoples into a Bronze Age environment, most vividly when Aeneas's sword cuts

through Turnus's bronze weapon on their first meeting (a scene that is not in the *Aeneid*). The tone is not of fascist imperialism, but rather an elegiac recall of the end of the age of heroes. Similarly, the depiction of Rome as a repressive society, where the city prefect Pedanius possesses files on dissidents and Tigellinus controls a repressive military force above the regular army, is a modernist reading that is absent from Sienkiewicz's novel. While parallels have been drawn by Scodel and Bettenworth with the Holocaust and the German Generals' Plot, more relevant for Rossi and his contemporaries would have been the situation in Italy under German occupation after Mussolini's removal from power in 1943. The passive resistance of the Christian children together with the self-sacrifice of Epicharis, a woman on the edge of society, recalls Rosellini's *Rome: Open City* and its idealized depiction of a union of Marxists and Catholics against repression. That there are no scenes of chariots racing (the exception where Nero is shown practicing is deliberately uninvolving), a staple of "epic" versions of the novel since 1912 which has lent itself to parody in the Coen brothers' *Hail Caesar!* (2016), is just one indicator of the desire to avoid typical film clichés (*pace* Scarrone 1985), as is the unusual absence of sex (represented only by Nero's unsettling rape of Epicharis) or gratuitous violence. Violence there is, but the crucifixions of slaves, the mangling of Christians by lions (as Petronius notes in disgust, not a spectacle, but a carnival), and the burning of humans alive is not there for audience titillation.

At one time a typical response to the adaptation of texts on screen was to discuss the extent to which these versions are "faithful" to their sources or "authentic." One Italian reviewer at the time of the original television screening lamented that the *Eneide* project would merely allow the viewers to avoid reading the original text. Such responses are, of course, versions of the theme that translation is a form of betrayal (*traduttore traditore*), a moralizing protection of property by suggesting that transfer is a violation of the rights of the original owner (or perhaps their heirs in a much later age). By contrast, in recent times a number of academics have supported film adaptation as an entry point to classical culture or even as a modern version of classical technique. Films may be "explicated" in a fashion similar to the way Greek and Roman texts were read from the Renaissance on by explaining the "difficult" bits such as the customs and practices of the creator and contemporaries, noting parallel texts (be they in the original or by comparison with other films) and detailing the historical circumstances when the works were produced.

In many ways, my focus on prominent themes in Rossi's work follows this traditional philological approach. Clearly the film-maker and his producers felt that they had some responsibility to the original texts and were not simply treating them as raw material from which to fashion any treatment they

liked. There was prestige in the production, but it was not merely a value that could be exchanged for attracting viewers. Still, the "authenticity" of the recreation was achieved not by seeking to reflect the ideology of the original author, but by an anthropological recreation of the circumstances within which these stories were set. To the best of our knowledge, the Homeric poems are set in a fantastic ahistorical world that mixed elements of the Bronze Age, the Greek Dark Ages, and the time of colonization. Virgil imagined his Aeneas as living in some such world but strongly referencing the power of the Roman state in his day. Sienkiewicz melded together Tacitus's history of Nero's reign with Christian fabulization of the period. Rossi seeks to break free of the accumulated historical burden by imagining instead another late Bronze Age world for Odysseus and Aeneas and recreating historical events in the Neronian Age (including elements such as the murder of Pedanius or the Pisonian Conspiracy that are in Tacitus's *Annals*, but not in Sienkiewicz's novel) and by seeking to understand the creation of a new religion at this time. This is not a museological epic—in the manner that Griffiths designed his Babylon in *Intolerance* (1916) on the basis of recent archaeological discoveries from that city—but a reimagining using non-classical sources (the stones of the Treasury of Atreus inspire Menelaus's dour palace in Sparta, while the clothing of the Phaeacians and Carthaginians in his version of the classical epics seems to be developed from garments depicted in Iron Age Spanish art). This is indeed *Verfremdung*, but an alienation effect that is respectful of its sources, as if we were imagining the *Aeneid* as written by Homer or Tacitus's novel, *Quo Vadis?*

The musings above surely reflect the influence of modern reception studies, which consider how each audience has reacted to pieces of creative art according to their time and culture and how these "readings" have become incorporated into our present responses to those work. At the same time, I am aware that "Rossi" is a construction of auteurist theory, a convenient way of attributing a multitude of artistic decisions to a single individual. Script, cinematography, set design and editing, for example, show the choices of a group of creative artists who worked alongside the director and the actors to produce the final product. In this respect, classicists have much to learn from modern film studies.

NOTES

1. The persecution of Christians, rather than simply Jews, by Nero after the Great Fire of AD 64 has recently been called into question by Brent Shaw (2015) on the basis that at this time the Romans would not be able to distinguish the group

by their teachings. Nonetheless, this is the canonical version preserved in Tacitus, *Annals* 16.44, on which Sienkiewicz's novel draws.

2. Unlike in the 1925 film (dir. D'Annunzio/Jacoby) or the 1951 version, Ursus's success does not provoke a revolution. That Tigellinus, not Nero as in Sienkiewicz' novel, gives the order for Ligia's release, shows where the real power lies in Rome: with the military, not with a doomed puppet.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

I, Claudius and Ancient Rome as Televised Period Drama

Juliette Harrisson

The BBC's 1976 adaptation of Robert Graves' novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* has been a touchstone for directors of both film and television bringing the ancient world to screen for many years. Perhaps surprisingly, however, it has rarely been the focus of academic scholarship. The most significant work on it is Sandra Joshel's 2001 article, "*I, Claudius*: Projection and Imperial Soap Opera" in her co-edited book *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*. In this article, Joshel offers an introduction to Graves' novels and their adaptation in the television series. However, she focuses primarily on its presentation in the United States as part of *Masterpiece Theatre* and its American reception. This chapter will provide an introduction to understanding *I, Claudius* in its British context before going on to examine the series' approach to its source material, followed by a brief look at its reception among writers and producers of films and television shows set in ancient Rome in the years since 2001, in order to demonstrate its phenomenal and ongoing impact.

I, Claudius was shown in the 1977–78 season of *Masterpiece Theatre*, along with *Dickens of London*, *Anna Karenina*, *Our Mutual Friend* and the second series of *Poldark* (pbs.org, 2015). *Anna Karenina*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Poldark* were also BBC serials, but *Dickens of London* was made by Yorkshire Television, and all were produced written and directed by different people. While the shared relatively static style, relatively cheap production values and British accents, all pulled together by the common thread

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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of Alistair Cooke's introductions, may have made these series appear homogenous to an American audience, they would have appeared less so to a British audience watching them on different channels, certainly not as part of the same series. It seems appropriate, therefore, to reassess *I, Claudius* within its originating, British context.

Production: The BBC and British Drama in the Mid-1970s

During the 1970s, there were only two providers of television in the United Kingdom running three channels; the BBC, who added their second channel BBC 2 in 1964, and independent commercial broadcaster ITV. There was no cable or satellite TV and it was not until 1981 that a third, commercial channel, Channel 4, was added. The BBC is publicly funded and paid for by the government, supported by the TV Licence Fee. Every home in the United Kingdom that includes a television (and, latterly, that watches TV either live or via "catch-up" on the Internet) must, by law, pay for a TV Licence (see bbc.co.uk, 2015b).

While not part of an ongoing series in the style of *Masterpiece Theatre* in the UK, *I, Claudius* was part of a wider tradition in British television, which brought with it certain expectations: the BBC classic serial. BBC classic serials are dramatizations of "classic" (usually nineteenth- or early twentieth-century) novels, which began on radio in the 1930s and moved onto television from the 1950s. Herbert Wise, explaining how he was approached to direct *I, Claudius*, explained simply, "I was told it was a classic serial. The BBC was doing, I think, three or six a year. It was part of its remit" (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002).

The BBC's mission as a publicly funded channel is to provide services that "inform, educate and entertain" (bbc.co.uk, 2015a). Under its first Director General, John Reith, the BBC's policy of providing a public service for social and cultural purposes, rather than entertainment for profit, was established (see O'Malley, 2006: 133). Although the corporation started to produce more populist programming from 1939 onwards, due to the departure of Reith in 1938 and the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 (O'Malley 2006: 134), the fact that the BBC has always been and still is publicly funded means that it has never moved entirely away from programming with an educational or otherwise "cultural" focus. BBC classic serials, as Wise mentioned, are part of that mission—they are intended to introduce audiences to "worthy and morally wholesome" classic literature (Giddings and Selby 2001: ix). While some of ITV's biggest period drama

successes—for example the original 1971–75 run of *Upstairs Downstairs*, or their latest hit *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015 in the UK, 2011–2016 as part of *Masterpiece Theatre* in the US)—have been original dramas with a period setting, the BBC is best known for these literary adaptations, such as Andrew Davies' beloved 1995 production of *Pride and Prejudice*.

I, Claudius stands out from the crowd of BBC classic serials in both its source and setting. While Edwardian novels were frequently adapted, a novel written and published as late as the 1930s was not often considered "classic" in the 1970s. Even more unusually, Graves' novel was a period drama set in a very different world to the usual, contemporary-when-written nineteenth and early twentieth century settings of classic serials; Georgian Jane Austen, Victorian Trollope and Dickens (*A Tale of Two Cities* notwithstanding), Galsworthy's Edwardian *Forsyte Saga*. However, the fact that Graves was a classicist with published translations of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (*Metamorphoses*) and, more importantly, Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars* (*Lives of the Caesars*) to his name, and had based the novels relatively closely on (written) ancient sources, ensured that his novels were "classic" in several senses of the word.[1] The setting, however, was still substantially different to the usual big bustles, high collars and genteel drawing rooms of many of the other classic serials. The classic serial had been undergoing a period of change and renewal since the mid-1960s, when the arrival of BBC 2 allowed some serials to be shown at a later timeslot and include more adult material (Giddings and Selby 2001: 26). One of the biggest successes originally shown in this Saturday evening timeslot was *The Forsyte Saga* in 1967 (repeated on BBC 1 in 1968).[2] The more adult material explored in this series introduced controversial issues surrounding sex and sexuality into the classic serial. The scene in which Soames Forsyte rapes his wife Irene was slightly expanded from the slim detail provided in the source novel (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 24–26). Following the screening of the scene, the BBC screened a debate on the scene and carried out a vox pop in which 54 people (out of 50 men and 50 women) sympathized with Soames, and only 39 with Irene (with seven indifferent: Hargreaves 2009: 32–33). The serial was a phenomenal success (Hargreaves 2009: 22–23), paving the way for more classic serials dealing with more adult or shocking material.

The Forsyte Saga remained a thoroughly typical classic serial in one sense in that, like so many classic serials, it offered a nostalgic view of Imperial Britain of the recent past. As time went on, however, fresh material was needed. Following the first color serial, *Vanity Fair* (1967), *The Pallisers* (1974) was a fairly lavish production based on Antony Trollope's novels intended to emulate the style—and, hopefully, the success—of *The Forsyte Saga*, but its reception turned out to be lackluster (Giddings and Selby 2001: 42–43).

A 1972 attempt to venture out into new ground with an extremely expensive adaptation of *War and Peace* (adapted by *I, Claudius*'s screenwriter Jack Pulman), including what was at the time the most expensive television drama set ever built as well as location filming in Yugoslavia, also met with a mixed response (Giddings and Selby 2001: 35). By the mid-1970s, then, the BBC were still looking for something to recapture the success of *The Forsyte Saga*, but increasingly reluctant to spend too much money on it.

Screen images of the Classical world in mainstream cinema were somewhat limited in the 1970s. Following the litany of disasters that accompanied the production of *Cleopatra* (dir. J. Manciewicz, 1963; see Solomon 2001: 68–75) and the poor critical and audience reception of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (dir. Anthony Mann, 1964), the big-budget ancient world epics that had dominated Hollywood during the 1950s had disappeared. The ancient world in the 1970s was represented in the cinema by screen versions of Shakespeare (*Julius Caesar*, 1970; *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1972) and of Greek tragedy (*The Trojan Women*, 1971; *Iphigenia*, 1977), alongside occasional art house films (*Sebastiane*, 1976) and quite varied approaches to the story of Jesus, not all actually set in the ancient world (*Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, both 1973; more traditionally, the television miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1977; and, eventually, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, 1979). The only mainstream films likely to gain a wide audience were the two modern-dress biblical musicals, which were unlikely to suggest "ancient Rome" particularly strongly to most viewers. There was a gap to be filled by television here.

Imperial Rome offered the opportunity to present something fresh and new, and at the same time familiar. Joshel has already discussed the representation of ancient Rome and the Romans as simultaneously Self and Other, "Us and Not Us," particularly in an American context, in her 2001 chapter. For an American audience, Rome is most frequently associated with British imperialism and therefore Other, and *I, Claudius* continues that idea, through its British-accented actors, while at the same time the domestication of the setting encourages a level of audience identification with the characters (Joshel 2001: 150–154). The actors' accents were particularly picked out by some critics at the time, with Harriet Van Horne complaining that "everybody speaks the clenched-teeth stage-English that goes sailing past the American ear as another damned furrin' tongue" (cited in Joshel 2001: 154). But for a British audience, of course, and for everyone involved in producing the making the series (except Austrian director Herbert Wise) the accents are not "foreign" at all.[3]

The paradox of the ways in which viewers are encouraged simultaneously to relate to and to distance themselves from ancient Romans is even starker

in Britain. One thing screen depictions of the Roman Empire share with depictions of Victorian or Edwardian Britain is the depiction of Empire. Like the Romans, the elite characters in the majority of classic serials live in a world in which they have put themselves firmly on top; and like the Romans, their complacency would prove ill-founded when their world would eventually, in Gibbon's famous phrase, decline and fall. By the 1970s, Britain's empire had more or less crumbled away, though there would still be some viewers who remembered looking at a map of the world in school with a quarter of it colored in pink to represent British territory.

Even aside from Britain's own imperial legacy, however, British artists' and audiences' relationship with the Roman Empire is a complex one. The Romans are at once an outside invading force and the ultimate ancestors of at least some of the population. They left their mark on the landscape in a way that can still be seen today, with major cross-country routes such as the Fosse Way laid along the lines of old Roman roads, something immediately obvious when you drive along them, because they are so straight.[4] However, the Romans are also invaders who conquered and abused the native population. A number of screen representations of Roman Britain made in Britain focus on Boudicca, a warrior queen in the mode of Elizabeth I fighting the Spanish Armada but considerably more proactive, a plucky British underdog fighting and dying for her people (see for example the aptly named miniseries *Warrior Queen*, starring Siân Phillips, 1978). In the 1970s, such themes were all the more heartfelt, considering many viewers would remember and might be veterans of the most recent attempt to invade Britain by Germany in 1940—the rest of the world might associate Britain with Empire, but many British viewers would see themselves in the resistance to it.

This paradox is brought to life in *I, Claudius* in the scene in which British king Caractacus confronts the Senate in Rome, in which both Roman and British characters are used to represent opposing forces in British society in the 1970s. The scene is inspired by Tacitus's description of Caractacus (or Caratacus) making a speech to the people of Rome when brought there in chains, in which he defends himself by pointing out that he does not want to be enslaved any more than they would (Tacitus, *Annals*, 12.36–37). Like Tacitus's later description of the revolt of the Iceni, the misery of being enslaved to an unsuitable Emperor is emphasized, with the by-product of producing a favorable image of the ancient Britons in the process.

In Episode 12[5] of *I, Claudius*, the dialogue spoken by Caractacus while his family fall at Claudius's feet in supplication but he stands resolutely tall embodies the nostalgia of the 1970s for British wartime spirit and for British determination not to allow a successful Nazi invasion.[6] Caractacus's dialogue

is perhaps a little stronger and more violent than the average nostalgic British war film, but it conveys the same general message:

> I'll tell you this. If a sword is all you're prepared to show us Britons, then be prepared to carry it forever in your hand and sleep with it forever by your side at night, for you will need it!

In performance, however, it is notable that Peter Bowles, better known for playing upper-class characters with Received Pronunciation[7] accents in sitcoms like *To the Manor Born* and *Only When I Laugh*, affects a regional northern English accent. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, some of the most severe economic problems in Britain revolved around trade disputes with miners, whose pay had fallen behind inflation, and who were mostly based in the north of England or in Wales, in contrast to the government, largely based in, and drawing much of its support from, the southeast of England.[8] Among the most significant of the many strikes that took place in Britain in the 1970s were two miners' strikes in 1972 and 1974. One of the influential figures in the 1972 strike was an executive from the Yorkshire branch of the National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Scargill, who by 1974 had become head of the Yorkshire branch of the union and was one of the key figures who brought about the 1974 strike. It is possible that Bowles only intended to convey a key Britishness in his Caractacus (much as Jamie Bell's native Geordie accent is used to convey Britishness against American-accented Romans and Gaelic-speaking Picts in Kevin Macdonald's *The Eagle*, 2011), as the only regional accents heard previously in the series had been southern English; the northern accent stands out from all others heard in the series and sounds sufficiently different to the Roman accents, while still "British." However, in the particular context of 1976, Caractacus's rough and ready appearance in comparison to the neatly seated senators around him, and his fiery rhetoric, is likely to have stirred up other parallels than a simple statement of "Britishness," presenting him as the "ordinary" British man standing up to the authorities.

Aside from length and the division into episodes, the most obvious difference between *I, Claudius* and ancient world epic films is in the focus of the story and the scale of the production. One of the factors that sets *I, Claudius* apart from most screen depictions of Rome is the complete lack of exterior filming, with the few scenes set outside shot on small sets and most of the series set indoors. The primary reason for this, of course, is budget. Not only had *The Pallisers* and *War and Peace* been relative disappointments, but the BBC was in increasing financial difficulty due to the wider economic problems in Britain throughout the decade, a period of frequent strikes and

economic uncertainty. Inflation saw prices rise threefold throughout the decade without the Licence Fee rising to meet it, and, since the BBC had offended both government and opposition, there was no help there (see Crisell 2002: 195).

All this meant that *I, Claudius* had to be filmed solely on interior sets with no location shooting at all, using a very small number of supporting artists to stand in for the entire population of Rome. As George Baker explained, they had approximately, "fifteen extras—that's all! And when you look at it, it looks as if there are about 150 people there" (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002). Explaining how he filmed scenes in the Senate or in an amphitheater within these restrictions, Herbert Wise said:

> We had the limitations of the studio, and we couldn't afford the Senate, so we had to build sections of it. Like the Colosseum for example, they were all watching Christians put to the lions and all the rest of it… all I just did is the sort of box that they were sitting in, and I did the rest with sound effects. I don't think you could get away with that now, but you could get away with it then, and that's all I could afford, it's all I had to do. I managed to show sections of the Senate where necessary and make it look bigger than it actually was, but we did things like that all the time, had 20 people looking like 200, and things like that. (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002)[9]

Wise here clearly sets out the limitations placed on the series, but also the production team's willingness to find ways around these and rely on the imagination of the audience to fill in the gaps. George Baker similarly paid tribute to Wise's skill at making the most out of what he had, saying, "I mean, Herbie really knew what he was doing with his camera and really knew how to shoot it so that it looked as if you were outside… and Tim Harvey, our designer, was equally brilliant" (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002). Perhaps this is another sign of the theatrical background of many of those involved with producing this serial and others in the 1970s. In the theatre, you provide the audience with the bare bones of a scene and expect them to supply the rest of the world you are portraying from their imaginations, and the same is often true of mid-twentieth century British television.

In some ways, the series makes a virtue out of its limited budget. One of Sandra Joshel's key points is that the interior setting and focus on the imperial family themselves allow the series to become an imperial soap opera, trading on the popular themes of "dirt" and villainous women taking down powerful men from within (Joshel 2001: 137–150). It allows a highly intimate peek into the imperial household, one which (unlike the earlier epic films) emphasizes character and human drama over spectacle.

One of the ways Wise achieved this was in his use of camerawork to focus the audience's attention in a way not possible in theatre, and not always possible in a big-budget film with "epic" scope either. Wise explained:

> With me, the camera is always an actor, very, very rarely an observer… It particularly paid off in *I, Claudius* because [it was possible] for the camera to tell the story as much as an actor would tell the story… You can tell so much more in a camera movement or a sudden cut to a close-up that you can do with words… I have to pay credit here to the camera crew, to Jim Atkinson, who was my senior cameraman. (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002)

This can be seen, for example, in the extraordinary way in which Wise films Augustus's death scene. Siân Phillips as Livia has a long monologue in this scene, while Brian Blessed's Augustus, who dies while she is talking, has no lines—but the camera focuses entirely on Augustus as we watch him beginning to understand just what has been happening all these years before passing away. This focus on the character of Augustus during a scene when only Livia is speaking is something that would be impossible in theatre, in which everyone would be looking at Livia, and highly unusual on film, in which the large cinematic screen almost demands to be filled. Only on television (and bearing in mind the size of the average television set in the 1970s) can a scene so intimate have the effect of drawing the viewer into the room with a dying man.

Setting the Scene: The Opening Scenes of *I, Claudius*

In order to examine how *I, Claudius* sets up its approach to its source material and to Roman history and signals it to the audience, I want to have a close look at the opening few scenes of Episode 1. As Elena Theodorakopoulos has pointed out, examining the beginning of a film, in which the film's "set-up" is established and explained, can allow for a more detailed analysis of how the film constructs its narrative—and the same is true of television (Theodorakopoulos 2010: 6). I am concentrating here on the opening scenes as viewed by a British audience, so I am focusing on the original opening without the framework of *Masterpiece Theatre* or Alistair Cooke's introduction, but including the dancing girls who were cut from the US version when it was first aired.

The series' famous opening credits sequence sets the tone for the series, particularly the blend of comedy and horror to which Wise attributes the

success of the show (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002). As we see a snake crawl across a mosaic image with a slightly perturbed expression on its face, we immediately know to expect characters who are sneaky and dangerous, but also a little bit buffoonish in some ways. Contrast this with the opening credits of *The Pallisers*, in which the camera pans slowly across a sunny lawn full of people in rich Victorian clothes playing croquet. The music adds to the effect: where *The Pallisers* used genteel strings in an upbeat mood to suggest a lost idyll, *I, Claudius* attacks the audience with brass (more reminiscent of some instruments known from illustrations from Rome) and a high-pitched metallic percussive sound along with dissonant trumpet and clarinet motifs not usually associated with classic serials (personal communication Ed Harrisson) which blares out at them, suggesting something altogether bolder and more vibrant.

While there is no Alistair Cooke, there is, of course, a framing device, but one intimately connected with the story. Claudius speaks his famous opening line, again implying a combination of power and humorous weariness as he follows up his impressive introduction, "I, Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus" with the self-deprecating "this-that-and-the-other," delivered with a sigh. Claudius's meeting with the Sibyl at Cumae is briefly dramatized, providing the impetus for the work and explaining Claudius's extreme candor, as it is not intended for anyone alive in Rome, but for us, the viewers. This point is emphasized as Claudius breaks the fourth wall and looks straight into the camera as he says, "You will find it [the memoir], I promise you."

We arrive at the meat of the story through a dinner scene in which the major characters during the early part of the series are introduced. These dinner scenes will be a touchstone for the series as a whole, with the state of the imperial household indicated by the lighting—bright and airy in this first scene, dark and dominated by shadows in later episodes—and by the number of diners—here a large group of principal characters with a much larger group implied to be just beyond the camera's view; at one point in Episode 10, at a low point in Claudius's reign, reduced to just himself and Herod Agrippa. All of this will, of course, culminate in Claudius's poisoning at just such a family dinner, in the same room (on the same set). These two scenes, the first preceded and the second followed by the only images of the Sybil in the series, book-ending the series as a whole (see also Joshel 2001: 143).

This opening scene immediately sets up the paradox of the Romans as simultaneously Self and Other. First it thrusts the image of near-naked black African dancers into the viewers' face in a sharp cut from the elderly Claudius—this being an exoticized, Othering image to a presumed middle-class, white British viewership—then it switches to observe the family at dinner, a normalizing activity Othered only by their reclined positions. The gentle bickering

that passes between them, though foreshadowing far much more serious divisions later, allows the audience to identify with the father trying to keep peace, or the daughter who just wants to eat the cake, drawing the viewer in even as the few moments beforehand may have pushed them out.

The scene then moves on to an overt statement of intent regarding the relationship between history, fiction and the audience. In an attempt to stop the family's bickering, Augustus calls for a Greek writer he has hired to entertain them with a prose piece about the Battle of Actium, a battle won by himself and Agrippa, both present. The Greek (Aristarchus) appears and has to ask for quiet before he can begin. This is the only time the unseen occupants of the rest of what is presumed to a large dining room are referred to directly, though their presence or absence may be established through background noise or the lack thereof in later episodes. Here, however, our attention is drawn to the unseen masses whose view of the top table is more or less that of an audience looking towards a stage, and who are about to watch a performance piece culminating in the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra, recalling the Shakespearean productions many of the cast were best-known for.

The point is further emphasized by the conversation between Augustus's usher (Thallus) and Aristarchus. Thallus, it emerges, used to be an actor. "Everyone's an actor in Rome," Thallus tells Aristarchus. "The theatre isn't what it was." "No," agrees Aristarchus, "and I'll tell you something else. It never was, what it was." This apparently inconsequential conversation between two characters we will never see again after this scene sets up the audience's expectations for the ancient Rome the series will depict. Everyone's an actor; everyone is playing a character, offering aspects of themselves for the consumption of others but never playing their true self. Augustus plays the role of benevolent Father of the Country, but cross him and you will see the absolute monarch underneath (see below); Livia plays the dutiful wife but underneath it she "rules Augustus" and her mind is "always turning, always scheming"; Tiberius, as we will discover later in the episode, is constantly battling a darkness within.

Aristarchus's words in reply remind the audience that the view they may have of the past is perhaps not a true reflection. Nostalgia can tint our view of the past in all sorts of ways, either producing a rosy-hued view of a simpler time or, as is more often the case concerning pagan Rome, making it even more violent and sexualized than the evidence suggests it was. But, of course, we cannot truly know what it was, only that our view is inevitably an image more than a reality—"it never was what it was." If this is not enough and some members of the audience are still expecting a documentary-like attempt to reproduce the reality of ancient Rome, we are reminded once more that we are watching fiction based on fiction based frequently on rumor when

Augustus congratulates Aristarchus after he has finished. "The battle, you know, it wasn't like that," he tells him. "But you describe it poetically," he reassures the crestfallen author. "I understand that, it was poetic license. I'm used to that." The message to the audience could not be clearer. This is a performance, a fiction, a piece produced for entertainment, and the truth within it will be the truth of poetry—it will be true to the human condition, to people and the way they behave and relate to each other, but not necessarily to historical fact.

Adapting the Novel

In BBC classic serials, "respect" for the original novel was paramount and the serials are, as Giddings and Selby put it, "dramatizations, not adaptations", sticking as closely as possible to the source text rather than adapting it more freely and artistically (Giddings and Selby 2001: viii). The 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, aside from a handful of scenes intended to sex it up a bit (Darcy in the bath in Episode 1, Darcy in a wet shirt in Episode 4), sticks almost exactly to Austen's original dialogue and aims, as far as possible, to provide a visualization of the novel for the audience. Jack Pulman's adaptation of *I, Claudius*, however, does take a few more liberties with the source text, partly because the novel was less well established than Jane Austen, partly because of the restrictions of the series' budget.

As Joshel has observed, the restriction to interior sets refocuses the story on the imperial family themselves (Joshel 2001: 132). As a fictional autobiography of a member of that family, this was always the case to some extent anyway. But Graves' novel includes digressions to other areas, outside of Rome, and other matters, particularly the military, such as his long section on the military uprising in Germania suppressed by Germanicus (justified on the grounds that Germanicus wrote to Claudius about it) (Graves 1934 [1979]: 182–189). However, there are some scenes that simply could not be filmed on interior sets, which is why most military incidents are portrayed in *I, Claudius* by a mud-and-blood-spattered soldier entering a room looking distressed and telling someone what has happened (most notably, the accident that kills Claudius's father Drusus in Episode 1, and the messenger who arrives to tell Augustus of the disaster in the Teutoburg Forest in Episode 3).

The series maintains Claudius's first person narrative, and his perspective informs much of the action. However, many scenes are expanded from Claudius's fairly basic reportage in the novel, and although for the most part there is an explanation for how he learned the basic facts (Postumus tells him what happened

to him after briefly escaping his guards on the way to exile in Episode 3, Agrippina tells everyone what happened to Germanicus in Episode 5, Livia confesses to her various crimes at dinner towards the end of her life in Episode 6), there are some scenes which unfold in a way Claudius could not possibly have known about in so much detail, such as Tiberius's conversation with his brother Drusus about his ambitions in Episode 1, or Tiberius and Thrasyllus's hysterical, hilarious reaction to the news of Lucius's death in Episode 2.

While, as a result, some themes were touched on more briefly in the adaptation, and of course some characters written out or streamlined, others were expanded. Unsurprisingly, the additions and expansion relate primarily to material highlighting sex, violence or both. A reference to Messalina having a competition with a prostitute becomes two full scenes (see Joshel 2001:142), and the most dramatic and most memorable expansion is that spun from Graves' brief line about the semi-mysterious death of Caligula's sister Drusilla, in which Claudius tells us "I am certain in my own mind that Caligula killed her, but I have no proof" (Graves 1934 [1979]: 342). In the only incident invented for the television series, Caligula, terrified that the child his sister and lover is pregnant with will be more powerful than himself and inspired by Greek mythology, performs a dramatic at-home Caesarian section and eats the fetus. While we do not see much, as Herbert Wise notes, the suggestion of something horrifying can be more effective than showing it (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002). As a result, the scene is one of the most memorable and horrifying in the series.

Unlike a novel, the interpretation of character in a television series is the work of actor and director as well as writer. Most of the characterizations presented in the series more or less match those of the novel; Livia is "wicked," but an able ruler; Caligula is completely mad (though Hurt's performance draws a level of sympathy that, perhaps, is not present in the book); Tiberius is bitter and twisted. There are, however, some significant differences between the portrayal of Augustus in the novel and the television adaptation, largely thanks to Brian Blessed's performance.

Augustus in Graves' novel is a surprisingly weak and ineffective character. Having made the decision to portray Augustus in a positive light, it was necessary for Graves, writing in Spain in the 1930s, to portray him as at heart a republican, not a dictator. Since Augustus essentially made a grab for power starting from the age of 18 and systematically gathered more and more control to himself until he had instituted a monarchy that lasted another 500 years, this might seem like a something of a challenge. Graves' solution was, essentially, to take Suetonius's criticism of Claudius, that he was entirely controlled by his wives and freedmen, and apply it to Augustus, though in Augustus's case it is more a case of "wife and friends" (Suetonius, *Divus Claudius*, 25).

In the novel, nearly all of Augustus's achievements, good and bad, are attributed to Livia. Livia makes "misunderstandings and jealousies" between Augustus and Antony, which Octavia smoothes out (Graves, 1934 [1979], 23). Livia designs the monarchy-without-kingship that is the Augustan principate, as, according to Claudius, "Livia realized now that the title of king could be waived so long as Augustus could control the substantial powers of kingship. By following her advice, he gradually concentrated in his single person all the important Republican dignities" (Graves 1934 [1979]: 28). It is Livia who thinks "Romulus" is not grand enough ("a mere bandit-chieftain") and suggests "Augustus" as a new name for the new regime (Graves 1934 [1979]: 29). Augustus and Livia share in administration, religious and military reforms, and the building of temples, public works and so on, for, "Fury though Livia was, but for her unwearying activity Augustus would never have been able to undertake the immense task he set himself of restoring Rome to peace and security after the long disasters of the Civil Wars—in which he had himself, of course, played so destructive a part" (Graves 1934 [1979]: 31) At one point, forced to make a decision alone, Claudius tells us that Augustus, "wished Livia were present to advise him" (Graves 1934 [1979]: 39). For the few decisions which cannot be attributed to Livia, largely because she disagrees with them, Agrippa or Maecenas get the credit. Livia works with Maecenas to get Augustus made a god in the provinces—Livia advises Augustus on it, Maecenas suggests it in the Senate (Graves 1934 [1979]: 30). Maecenas suggests marrying Agrippa to Julia and patches up the quarrel (Graves 1934 [1979]: 39). The restriction on Triumphs, of which Claudius's narrative voice approves and which is read as an attempt to reduce wars, is attributed to advice from Agrippa (Graves 1934 [1979]: 57).

The only area in which Augustus is occasionally allowed some agency in Graves' novel is that of the use of violence. Although he longs for a republic, Augustus is nevertheless a dictator and he has a dictator's bloodlust. It was this which drew Graves' Livia to Augustus in the first place, as, "She had picked on Augustus as a better instrument for her ambitions than Antony—Lepidus did not count—and that he would stick at nothing to gain his ends and proscriptions he had shown two years before, when 2,000 knights and 300 senators belonging to the opposite faction had been summarily put to death, by far the greatest number of these at Augustus's particular insistence" (Graves 1934 [1979]: 21) (contrast this with 2003 miniseries *Imperium: Augustus* in which, in order to portray Augustus in a positive light, the blame for the proscriptions is laid firmly on Antony). This comes back to bite him in the end, when Claudius asks Livia how she could bear to kill her husband of fifty years and she replies, "I never forgot for a moment

whose daughter I was" (Graves 1934 [1979]: 292), referring to her father's suicide after fighting with Brutus and Cassius at Philippi.

In the television series, this sense of Augustus's capacity for violence is maintained but translated into a depiction of a more powerful man with more responsibility for his own actions. Some of this comes through in the writing, as Augustus makes more of his own decisions and demonstrates more authority over others, including Livia. In that first family dinner, for example, while Agrippa is identified as the general responsible for the victory at Actium, both he and Marcellus clearly defer to Augustus. His absolute authority is amusingly depicted in his flat response to Julia's request that the slaves "leave the cake!" Later in the episode, while Augustus and Agrippa are arguing, Augustus calls Livia and says "at once", and she comes at once. As they continue to argue, Livia is present, but completely silent until Agrippa leaves, maintaining a female role as advisor in private, but with Augustus taking charge in front of others. With Maecenas written out of the series, it is Augustus who make the decision to agree that Agrippa can marry Julia.

Some of that power, however, is displayed through Blessed's performance. This can be seen particularly in the treatment of the men accused of sleeping with Augustus's daughter Julia. In the novel, Livia singles out three or four men to ruin and names them in a letter she writes to the Senate in Augustus's name, using his seal (Graves 1934 [1979]: 73). Iulus Antonius is accused of conspiracy and commits suicide, and "the other men whom Livia accused of adultery were banished" (Graves 1934 [1979]: 74).

In Episode 2 of the television series, on the other hand, while Augustus's breakdown concerning Julia happens more or less as in the book, he takes the punishment of the men accused with her into his own hands. After interrogating a few of them, he screams at the whole room in fury, "IS THERE ANYONE IN ROME WHO HAS NOT SLEPT WITH MY DAUGHTER?" Brian Blessed explained that, "It's a terrifying scene because you there see the full power of Caesar at work, and you know that every one of those senators who has slept with his daughter… they're all going to die horribly" (Favourite Scenes, 2002). This Augustus is much more in control, much more powerful, than the "overgrown boy" of the novel (Graves 1934 [1979]: 53).

Graves' Augustus is, "a very honest, merry, kindly man" (Graves 1934 [1979]: 41), of whom Claudius says, "I could never find it in my heart to hate Augustus as I came to hate my grandmother" (Graves 1934 [1979]: 53). In the series, Augustus maintains much of this boyishness and jollity alongside his power—indeed, his power is all the more impressive for it. Herbert Wise described what he was looking for in casting as: "I wanted an

authoritative person, and slightly ludicrous, because he was written pompously, and I was looking for an actor who could actually do this. And to me Brian did it marvelously" (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002). His authority comes partly from Blessed's own performance, as well as partly from the performances of the others around him. Blessed remembers Wise's instructions to him at the start of filming as, "He said, 'First and foremost my main note for you is this, Brian; just be as you are, full of flannel… but do not act being an emperor. You must not act being an emperor at all. I want you to be an ordinary guy. Everybody else is gonna make you an emperor'" (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002).

Like most BBC classic serials, *I, Claudius* is a fairly faithful adaptation, with many of its alterations made necessary by budgetary limitations or in order to streamline an already large cast. However, its soap opera style focus on the family and its use of carefully judged sex and violence go beyond practical considerations. *I, Claudius* offers a slightly different view of ancient Rome to its source novel: one more suited to television, but also one sometimes more interested in subtleties of character (Augustus, Caligula) than its source.

The Impact of *I, Claudius* on Later Screen Representations of Rome

Although the initial critical response was a little lackluster, by the time the series had finished airing, *I, Claudius* was a firm success, and it went on to be very successful when aired in the United States as part of *Masterpiece Theatre* as well. The critics, it seemed, had been taken aback after not knowing quite what to expect; as Derek Jacobi put it, "Initially, the critics were a bit pissy about it" (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002). Herbert Wise remembered the *Guardian* critic "starting his criticism by saying, 'There ought to be a society for the prevention of cruelty to actors'" (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002). Siân Phillips has suggested that the language and style of the series was part of the issue:

> My then husband Peter O'Toole said, "Don't worry about this". He had asked somebody to research the notices for the novel when that came out, and they were almost identical with the notices for the series when it came out. People were shocked that people in togas were talking slang and they found it rather odd. And then, within a few weeks, everyone had sort of turned around and changed their minds and started giving it much better notices. (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002)

The situation soon turned around, however, and Herbert Wise recalled that, "about halfway through the series, I got an inkling that this was bigger than most other things" (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002). Derek Jacobi added, "The critics initially hadn't greeted it with open arms, but right from the beginning, the public seemed to" (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002).

Several of the actors attributed the series' success to the same thing Joshel identified as one of its trademarks; its similarity with soap opera. Brian Blessed suggested that, "If you like *Eastenders*, if you like *Coronation Street*, or any of those, then… you can relate *I, Claudius* to that," while Christopher Biggins described it as:

> like a sort of Roman *Coronation Street*. I mean, I think that's where it scored, because it was everyday life in a way, and portrayed as such, and yet the most appalling things happened, like murders and everything, which wouldn't happen in an everyday soap of today but in those days it did, and I think that's where the public took it into its heart and relished it. (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002)

The critics eventually agreed with the public. *I, Claudius* was nominated for four BAFTAs in 1977 and won three (Best Actress, Best Actor and Best Design) and it was nominated for three Emmys in 1978 and won two (Direction and Art Direction) (Imdb.com, 2015).

The success of *I, Claudius* has left its mark on many later screen representations of Rome, on film and television. The cast and some crew became indelibly associated with the ancient world; in the years immediately following the series' broadcast, Siân Phillips was cast as Boudicca in the Thames Television series *Warrior Queen* (1978), and Herbert Wise was asked to direct the BBC and Time-Life's television production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, part of the BBC Television Shakespeare series which transmitted made-for-television productions of all 37 Shakespeare plays between 1978 and 1985. This association went far beyond the years immediately following the production; Derek Jacobi was cast as Senator Gracchus in Ridley Scott's 2000 *Gladiator*, and in Kenneth Branagh's *Cinderella* (2015), his (royal) character is introduced standing near a statue of a Roman-style figure in a toga.

I, Claudius's biggest impact on later screen productions may well be the legacy of a single character. Siân Phillips' portrayal of the Livia written by Graves and Jack Pulman was so compelling and so successful that hardly a Roman-set production has gone by since without including a malevolent, scheming elite female character, even when the story is almost entirely focused on soldiers lost beyond Hadrian's Wall (*Centurion*) or on a

gladiatorial rebellion (*Spartacus: Blood and Sand*). Even beyond the ancient world, the character has had an impact on those who recognize the incipient Mafia presented in *I, Claudius*'s imperial family, with the unpleasant matriarch Livia in *The Sopranos* named after *I, Claudius*'s Livia (see Pomeroy 2008: 72).

Livia's impact on later screen productions relating to Rome can be seen most clearly in the BBC–HBO co-production *Rome* (2005–2007). The character of Atia (Polly Walker), more or less a footnote in the historical record, is clearly inspired by *I, Claudius*'s scheming Livia (see Augoustakis, 2008: 117; Solomon 2008: 17). The link is so strong that, in one of film history's more tortured in-jokes, the 2010 remake of *Clash of the Titans* cast Walker in the same role played in the 1981 version by Siân Phillips. The historical Atia died around 43 BC, but her Livia-inspired character was kept alive right up to the end-point of the series around 30 BC; clearly, the writers did not want to let her go.

Although Atia's chief rivalry throughout the series is with Caesar's former lover Servilia, the influence of *I, Claudius*'s Livia and her long-reaching impact can also be seen late on in the series, when Livia herself is introduced (rather hurriedly, following the cancellation of the series partway through season two, which resulted in the period 42 BC–30 BC being covered in four episodes). Commenting on Livia's introduction in Season Two, Episode 8, executive producer John Melfi explained that:

> The set-up right here of Livia… the pre-*I, Claudius* moment of this whole segment is really intense I think for us. We get to see the early stages of the monster that Livia becomes.
> (Audio Commentary on *Rome,* Season Two, Episode 8, "A Necessary Fiction")

Director Carl Franklin added:

> It's so unexpected in some ways because she's such a charming innocent-looking girl in the beginning, and then you see that… when she introduces herself and they introduce her to the rest of the family and she's just a little too forthcoming, you know, she's just a little too comfortable speaking in the presence of Mark Antony and Atia, the mother… and a little too anxious to recognize them as family, not showing respect for the protocol—kinda lets you know, she's gonna be hell on wheels.
> (Audio Commentary on *Rome,* Season Two, Episode 8, "A Necessary Fiction")

Melfi feels this makes her "a perfect partner for Octavian, who is growing into his own hunger for power" (Audio Commentary on *Rome* Season Two Episode 8, "A Necessary Fiction").

This unspoken but assumed connection with *I, Claudius* has a significant impact on how the audience views one of the final scenes of the series in Season Two, Episode 10. If the viewer is only familiar with *Rome*, they experience a moment of bittersweet victory as Atia gets one-up on the upstart Livia by taking her rightful place viewing Octavian's Triumph. However, for viewers familiar with *I, Claudius*, Livia's resentful expression remind us that soon, Livia will be the most powerful woman in Rome—and if we follow the plot of *I, Claudius*, she will be responsible for the deaths of Atia's grandson (Marcellus, written out of *Rome*, possibly due to the early cancellation), and two of her great-grandsons (Gaius and Lucius) and the exile of her granddaughter (Julia) (see Harrisson 2015).

Thanks to several repeat showings and its availability on DVD since 2002 (and also available to rent on DVD from Netflix: dvd.netflix.com, 2015), *I, Claudius* continues to be one of the BBC's most popular classic serials and to gain new fans. *I, Claudius* was voted the ninth-best British TV drama of all time in a BBC America online poll (BBC America.com, 2015) and in the British Film Institute's 2000 list of the best British TV programs of all time, it came in twelfth (news.bbc.co.uk, 2000). HBO acquired the rights to adapt the novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* in 2011 and were reported as teaming up with BBC 2 to produce a new miniseries from the books as a sort of unofficial follow-up to *Rome*, though as of November 2016, it is unclear whether they are proceeding with the planned series (Goldberg 2011).

Herbert Wise noted in 2002 that, "If I say I did *I, Claudius* all these years later, people still react to it, still remember it, still say 'oh, I see'. And I've done a lot of work since then, some it quite well-received, but that's the one that everybody remembers" (*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic, 2002). It seems safe to say that the series' impact on screen representations of ancient Rome can hardly be overestimated.

NOTES

1. In the preface to *Claudius the God*, Graves replied rather defensively to some critics who had implied that in *I, Claudius* he "had merely consulted Tacitus's *Annals* and Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars*, run them together, and expanded the result with my own 'vigorous fancy.' This was not so" (Graves 1935: 5–6). He then provides a long list of the primary sources he used in writing *Claudius the God*. There is certainly no reason to disbelieve him, but it is nevertheless true that Tacitus's *Annals* and Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars* are the texts most frequently called to mind by the novel. Wherever Tacitus is available, Graves tends to follow him reasonably closely, and it is Tacitus who provides the indictment of Livia that Graves takes as his jumping-off point for portraying her as a

serial-killing megalomaniac (Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.3, 1.10). The novel's account of the reign of Tiberius includes a lengthy digression on Germanicus's putting down of mutinies and war in Germany (justified on the grounds that he wrote to Claudius about it) which was presumably of interest to Graves, a veteran of the First World War, but also reflects the content of Tacitus's *Annals* and Tacitus's areas of interest. When we get to Caligula, however, and Tacitus's account is lost, Graves displays a stronger tendency towards Suetonian gossip, with just about every rumour and every bizarre act attributed to Caligula recorded as "true" and attributed to madness, with little other motivation (he does talk about Caligula's reckless spending and need for money, but the building of temples to himself in Rome is attributed entirely to madness). While Tiberius's vices are referred to briefly and pages dedicated to Germanicus in Germania, Caligula's reign is nothing but complete insanity and personal gossip—perhaps partly because it is from Suetonius, rather than Tacitus.

2. It was the success of *The Forsyte Saga* when screened in the United States in 1970 that led to the creation of *Masterpiece Theatre* in 1971 (O'Connor, 1991).
3. With the exception of those imitating generic "Eastern" (Patsy Byrne as Martina the poisoner, James Faulkner as Herod Agrippa, Renu Setna as Musa) or German (the guards) accents, everyone in *I, Claudius* speaks with traditional cut-glass Royal Shakespeare Company upper-class accents, unless they are playing a lower class character, in which case they will use a broad, Estuary-like accent (the non-German guard; these parts are rare in *I, Claudius* due to its focus on the Imperial household itself).
4. Some screen representations of Roman Britain made in Britain emphasize these connections through casting and dialogue. These often focus on the idea that the "lost" Ninth Legion settled down and intermarried with the local population somewhere in Scotland or Northern England (see for example *The Last Legion*, *King Arthur* and *Centurion*). In *King Arthur* and *Centurion*, for example, Roman soldiers are portrayed as "just like" regular British squaddies and officers, speaking in a variety of regional accents.
5. I have numbered the episodes according to the original broadcast, in which Episode 1 was double length and there were 12 episodes overall; subsequent repeats tend to split Episode 1 at the halfway point and show 13 episodes in total.
6. In the 1971 *Dad's Army* movie (spun off from the popular sitcom), for example, Captain Mainwaring of the Home Guard stands proudly on the White Cliffs, looking out towards German-occupied France, and says, "There'll be no weekends off. Whenever they come, we'll be ready for them; spring, summer, autumn or winter. Over the sea, or out of the sky… wherever they come from, we'll be ready for them." In a more contemporary example, 1942 propaganda film *Went the Day Well?* opens with an image of German soldiers' graves in an English village and depicts the inhabitants fighting the first salvo of a German invasion, in some cases sacrificing themselves in the process.
7. Received Pronunciation [RP] is an accent of spoken English. Unlike other UK accents, it's identified not so much with a particular region as with a particular social group—the upper classes. It is the accent adopted by anyone aiming to

avoid a regional accent, often associated with BBC newsreaders during the twentieth century, and is the accent associated with the use of standard British English.

8. The unrest eventually culminated in the decimation of the mining industry following the year-long strike under Margaret Thatcher in 1984–5, "the most bitter industrial dispute in British history" (bbc.co.uk, 2008).
9. Wise has, of course, become rather confused about his dates. The Colosseum was built by the Emperor Vespasian and completed and dedicated by his son the Emperor Titus in AD 80, so none of these characters ever sat in the Colosseum. Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus and executed during the reign of Tiberius, somewhere around AD 33 during the ten years Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and the first substantial persecution of Christians was carried out by Nero following the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64, well after the series finishes.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Premium Cable Television

Monica S. Cyrino

Thirty years after network television innovated the miniseries format and broadcast the ancient Roman world by offering highbrow historical drama with a bare-bones minimalist look in Herbert Wise's *I, Claudius* (UK: BBC 1976, USA: PBS 1977), ancient Rome burst back on to the small screen with a decidedly different critical aesthetic and a completely new commercial strategy. Two series that premiered on premium cable television channels, HBO *Rome* (2005–2007) and STARZ *Spartacus* (2010–2013), sought to capitalize on the recent renaissance of high-budget antiquity-themed narratives on the big screen by combining the spectacular visual opulence of classic mid-century epic cinema with the graphic sex and gritty violence of modern R-rated action films. In a post-*Gladiator* (2000) entertainment environment, both HBO *Rome* and STARZ *Spartacus* were extremely successful in engaging with earlier onscreen receptions of the ancient Roman world while each series broke its own kind of new ground in portraying the familiar historical events and characters of the Late Roman Republic.

HBO *Rome* (2005–2007)

The series *Rome*, a lavish two-season co-production between HBO (Home Box Office) Entertainment and the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), was an extraordinary critical and commercial success for premium cable

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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television (Cyrino 2008, 2015). This was not the first time HBO and BBC had teamed up for a cable television triumph: the two companies had previously joined forces on the production of the Emmy Award-winning miniseries, *Band of Brothers* (2001). *Rome* was created by British screenwriter and director Bruno Heller (who also served as an executive producer), John Milius, and William J. MacDonald. Oxford-educated classicist Jonathan Stamp, who had previously been producing documentaries in the BBC's History Division, served as the show's historical consultant and later as a co-producer for the second season. The series' production team endeavored to portray ancient Rome in more realistic terms, as they strove for visual and narrative authenticity rather than strict historical accuracy.

Rome was filmed, in partnership with RAI (Radiotelevisione Italiana), on enormous outdoor sets covering five full acres and six sound stages at the celebrated Cinecittà Studios in Rome, as well as at other various locations around the central Italian countryside (Cyrino 2008, 2015). The outdoor studio sets of *Rome* recreating the serpentine streets of the Roman Subura and the massive open air Forum Romanum, which are now open to visitors on paid guided tours of the Cinecittà backlots, have since been used for other television and movie productions: these include an episode of the BBC-produced science fiction television show *Doctor Who* (episode 190, "The Fires of Pompeii," 2008), and the Japanese-made time-traveling *Thermae Romae* films (2012 and 2014). *Rome* commanded an enormous international crew of nearly 400 employees to build, maintain and prepare these impressively detailed sets for each individual episode. At a cost of over $100 million per season, and with such a commitment of professional artistry and talent, the series *Rome* returned high quality, big-screen production values, with a striking visual spectacle of sets, props and costumes both sumptuous and highly authentic, together with exceptional scripts, plots and acting that would be considered powerful on screens of any size.

Rome's first season premiered in the United States on the cable channel HBO starting in August 2005, and unfolded in twelve weekly episodes as it tracked the later career of Julius Caesar from his return to Rome after his conquest of Gaul down to his death. The pilot episode, "The Stolen Eagle," attracted a solid four million viewers, and cumulative viewership for each episode increased over the course of a week's worth of rebroadcasts to a high of almost nine million viewers. In the United Kingdom, *Rome* aired on the BBC network in November 2005 and rolled out in eleven episodes: at the time it was reported that the BBC had decided to edit the first three episodes (all directed by prolific British director Michael Apted) down to two, purportedly because British audiences were more familiar with the historical background than their American counterparts and thus did not require such

lengthy exposition (Cyrino 2008). But this claim has been disputed by several individuals involved in the production of *Rome*, who claimed that the BBC's decision to edit the episodes down to eleven for British viewership was driven more by the economies of scheduling and a desire to boost ratings by highlighting the scenes of sex and violence rather than any evaluation of the relative education levels of Anglo-American audiences. Later, however, in April 2007, all twelve episodes of the original uncut version of *Rome*'s first season were shown in the UK on the digital TV channel UKTV Drama. The first season of *Rome* garnered mostly positive critical reviews and won several industry awards, including four Emmy Awards out of eight nominations in 2006, and it was nominated for numerous other awards, including Golden Globes and BAFTAs.

Rome, Season One (2005) charts the final years of the Roman Republic, with its brutal civil wars and dangerous political intrigues. It chronicles the trajectory of Julius Caesar's later career, as it follows the events that took place between Caesar's decision to return to Rome after his conquest of Gaul in 52 BC and his assassination by senatorial conspirators in 44 BC. After his victory over the Gallic tribes under the leadership of Vercingetorix at the battle of Alesia in September 52 BC, as the series begins, the proconsul Caesar is planning to return to Rome after eight years of warfare to seek his political fortunes. *Rome*'s first season brilliantly narrates Caesar's inevitable conflict with Pompey, his military partnership and close friendship with Mark Antony, his fateful crossing of the Rubicon in 49 BC, his mentorship of his great-nephew Octavian, his dalliance with Cleopatra in 48–47 BC, and the ultimate betrayal by Brutus that culminated in Caesar's murder on the Ides of March 44 BC. The season finale episode, "The Kalends of February," ends with a shot of Caesar stabbed multiple times by his assailants and lying covered in blood on the floor of the Senate.

The second season of *Rome* premiered in the United States in January 2007, with 7.5 million viewers tuning in to the first episode, "Passover," as it spread out over ten weekly episodes lasting until late March. In the United Kingdom, *Rome*'s second season was shown in the summer in June-July 2007 on the channel BBC Two. During the shooting of the second season there were rumors and conflicting reports that a third season might be produced, but the exceedingly time-compressed Season Two turned out to be the final one (Cyrino 2015). *Rome*'s producers had planned to take the entire run of the series as far as four or five full seasons: the second season was to go down only to the deaths of Brutus and Cassius, while a third and fourth season would have taken place in Egypt and ended with the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra. A possible fifth season would have followed the rise of the Messiah in Palestine, thereby taking the series into entirely new

dramatic and geographical territory, and would have been a curious foreshadowing of the recent surge in popularity of Bible-themed films: for example, Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014), Christopher Spencer's *Son of God* (2014) and Ridley Scott's *Exodus* (2014). But in September of 2006, HBO decided to cancel *Rome*, announcing that the ten episodes of Season Two would be the last. So the producers decided to collapse the narratives outlined for the third and fourth seasons into the second one, and scuttled plans for the fifth altogether. Widespread critical acclaim and a substantial audience of nearly eight million viewers were not enough to justify the $100 million per season price tag: with its high production values, sumptuous sets and costumes, and generous array of international talent, *Rome* was simply too expensive, and so the cost was deemed unsustainable over the course of subsequent seasons. *Rome* still ranks as the most expensive television series ever made, averaging over $10 million per episode: compare this to HBO's fantasy series *Game of Thrones* (2011–current), the second most expensive television series, with a per-episode budget of about $6 million, and whose first season budget reached $60 million.

Rome, Season Two (2007) opens dramatically with Caesar murdered on the Senate floor, and follows the aftermath of his death and the chaotic situation in Rome in the turbulent years from 44 BC to 29 BC. The second season of *Rome* primarily explores the origins and consequences of the violent power struggle between Antony, Caesar's most trusted general and ally, and Octavian, his great-nephew and legal heir (Kelly 2013). Beginning immediately after Caesar's assassination in March 44 BC, the second season takes six episodes to recount the pursuit of the tyrannicides, Brutus and Cassius, down to their ultimate defeat and death at the battle of Philippi in October 42 BC. The final four episodes of Season Two comprise the condensed narrative of the Alexandrian story that was originally planned for the third and fourth seasons, from the volatile (and temporary) alliance of Antony and Octavian in the second triumvirate to their unavoidable military conflict in Egypt over who would rule the nascent Roman empire. *Rome*'s second season comes to an end with only two abridged episodes to narrate the famous love affair between Antony and Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, as the series concludes with Antony and Cleopatra's defeat at the battle of Actium in 31 BC and their subsequent suicides. The series concludes with a lengthy sequence in the final episode, "De Patre Vostro, About Your Father," that shows Octavian's triumph in 29 BC.

Rome features a broad array of characters, including both historical figures attested in the ancient sources as well as fictional characters invented to enhance the plots and flesh out the personal narratives of the main players. Such a combination of real and fictional characters can be found in nearly all

films based on ancient Roman history, from *Quo Vadis* (1950) to *Gladiator* (2000) (Cyrino 2005); while it has also been a creative hallmark of other historically themed television programs on HBO, such as the critically acclaimed Western drama *Deadwood* (2004–2006) or the much-exalted foundational miniseries *John Adams* (2008), winner of thirteen Emmy Awards, more than any other miniseries in television history. But the producers of *Rome* had a stroke of brilliant good fortune when they decided to interweave with the "famous" historical Roman characters, like Caesar, Antony, and Cicero, two "regular guy" protagonists, Titus Pullo and Lucius Vorenus, who are in fact mentioned by Caesar in his military commentaries (*The Gallic War* 5.44); these men have the distinction of being the only two common soldiers mentioned by name in Caesar's works. Fans of the series agree that the characters of Pullo and Vorenus are the heart and soul of *Rome*'s narrative trajectory, and are thereby able to represent both the prestige and realism of historical authenticity as well as the excitement of dramatic originality. In addition, Vorenus and Pullo are played as "ordinary" Romans, and so they are able to invite the audience more easily into the grand and often complicated historical account that might otherwise have been difficult for some viewers to penetrate.

Among these many diverse roles, both historical and fictional, the series *Rome* is noteworthy for its presentation of a number of dynamic, compellingly drawn female characters. *Rome* introduces several charismatic female characters as the series explores their personalities, motivations and interlocking relationships, including the well-known historical figures, such as Servilia, Octavia and Cleopatra; and the fictional ones created just for the series, such as Niobe, wife of the main protagonist Vorenus, as well as numerous servant women who are named and given deep plot lines, such as Eirene, Pullo's love interest, and Gaia, an ambitious and ruthless striver. The themes of class, sexuality, politics and religion are all examined and keenly exposed though the narratives of these virtuoso portrayals of ancient women.

Many of the episodes in each of the two seasons of *Rome* employ a cinematic editing technique of cutting back and forth between the "high" and "low" worlds to a remarkable and entertaining narrative effect. This juxtaposition of the two worlds in *Rome*, between the elites and the plebs, masters and slaves, and between the historical personages and the invented ones, creates a distinctive dramatic friction that is unlike any other representation of the ancient world seen before on screen. Although Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960) was the first film to give a realistic impression of the lives of lower-class people in antiquity, that film blatantly branded the world of the rebellious slaves as "good" and positioned it starkly against the decadent lifestyle of the jaded Roman aristocracy, which was accordingly marked as

"evil" (Cyrino 2005). But the series *Rome* resists such simplistic oppositions, and offers a much more nuanced view of how the two worlds are inextricably entwined to make up the authentic, multivalent fabric of Rome in the last days of the Republic. Even *Rome*'s graffiti-inspired opening titles, set to an alluring and exotic-sounding score, and vividly signaling the themes of sex, violence and power, promise that the series will show the high and low worlds of the city mingling together at street level.

Rome exhibits several instances of this dramatic parallelism throughout the series, with the "bridge" characters of Vorenus and Pullo, along with their family members and associates, providing the majority of opportunities for narrative analogies between themselves and their elite leaders. An example of this technique of scene matching occurs in the fourth episode of Season One, "Stealing from Saturn," where Caesar's niece Atia is hosting an elegant soiree to welcome home her uncle and to bolster the growing political power of the Julian family; at the same time, the camera lens shifts back and forth to the more modest festivities at the home of the recently returned Vorenus, who is also embarking on a new business venture. The initial episodes of Season Two also follow this narrative matching technique of *Rome*'s first season, as they reveal the overlapping boundaries between the historical events and the fictional sub-plots, and between the elite and lower-class characters. One powerful example appears in the second season's premiere episode, "Passover," with the portrayal of the high political intrigue and shifting alliances surrounding the public funeral of Julius Caesar, while the camera cuts back and forth to the humble private funeral of Niobe, Vorenus's wife, with its quiet pulse of personal emotions exposing the devastating impact of her death upon their immediate family. By using this editing technique to suggest a narrative congruence, *Rome* visually underscores the link between the elite characters and those of the lower classes, without casting any value judgment as to the relative merits or morals of either. Rather, the characters' equality of purpose is emphasized, and their shared qualities as both ambitious and family-focused Romans.

HBO Home Video released the complete first season DVD of the series in the United States in August of 2006 to great popular response, and the second season DVD followed a year later in August of 2007. Whether utilizing DVD or On-Demand services, *Rome* is a series that rewards repeated viewings, so that fans may digest and savor the complex political and social structures as well as appreciate and enjoy the opulent details of the sets, props and costumes. In the several years since the series wrapped a tantalizing rumor persists that a feature film based on *Rome* is in development. Although HBO appears not to be involved in the production, a script has reportedly been written by Heller, the series creator, and is being shopped to various studios.

Cast members from the original series have commented in the press that they would participate in such a film, which would likely pick up a few years after the end of Season Two and follow the main characters, Pullo and Vorenus, on further adventures in the city and provinces of ancient Rome.

STARZ *Spartacus* (2010–2013)

The story of Spartacus, the historical Thracian gladiator who led a slave uprising against the Roman Republican army from 73 to 71 BC, has inspired numerous receptions over the centuries in a variety of different media, while the figure of the rebel slave leader has often served as an icon of resistance against oppression in modern political movements and popular ideologies. An important recent adaptation of the Spartacus narrative was the wildly successful four-season original television series from the US-based STARZ premium cable channel, created by Stephen S. DeKnight, who also served as executive producer and head writer for the series (Augoustakis and Cyrino 2017). The show's other executive producers included Sam Raimi and Rob Tapert, longtime collaborators who also produced *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–1999) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001). The series was filmed on location in New Zealand and employed numerous local actors and crew. Heavily marketed and initially shown in the United States on pay television channels starting in January 2010, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* attracted a huge fan base and spawned a prequel, *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena* (2011), as well as two sequels, *Spartacus: Vengeance* (2012) and *Spartacus: War of the Damned* (2013). The series also aired internationally on various broadcast networks around the world. Soon after each season was broadcast, the DVD and Blu-ray Disc sets were released for home video purchase in the US, UK and Australia.

Producers of the series decided that the first season would elaborate on the shadowy events of the early life of Spartacus leading up to the historical records (attested in the writings of Plutarch, Appian and other ancient historians). The first season, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010), tells of the capture of Spartacus in Thrace, his enslavement, and his training as a gladiator in the *ludus* of Quintus Lentulus Batiatus in Capua. The premiere season was then followed by *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena* (2011), a miniseries prequel to the first season, which fills in the back-story about the rise of the *lanista* Batiatus in the gladiator business. The third installment (technically known as the second season) of the series, *Spartacus: Vengeance* (2012), depicts the aftermath of the slaves' bloody escape from the *ludus* and the development and progress of the servile gladiator rebellion. The final season, *Spartacus:*

War of the Damned (2013), focuses on the decisive conflict between the rebel army, led by Spartacus and his gladiator-troops, and the Roman Republican army, led by Marcus Licinius Crassus and a young Julius Caesar. The "disclaimer" that begins every episode throughout the entire STARZ *Spartacus* series is extraordinary both for its bold claim to historicity as well as its unapologetic stance on the explicitness of its subject matter (note the capitalization): "*Spartacus* is a Historical Portrayal of Ancient Roman Society that Contains Graphic Violence and Adult Content. Viewer Discretion is Advised."

STARZ *Spartacus* both engages with earlier onscreen receptions of antiquity as it breaks new ground. In some respects the *Spartacus* series is highly derivative, as it was clearly intended to appeal to a ready-made audience who had enjoyed recent films and television series set in the ancient world. *Spartacus* uses the slow motion combat sequences and visual stylization from Zack Snyder's fantasy film *300* (2006), the nudity, sexuality and focus on strong female characters from the HBO series *Rome* (2005–2007), and the exciting arena sequences filled with physically striking fighters from Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000). But more nudity, more sex, more violence and more blood than had ever been seen together on mainstream television, mixed with gripping plot-lines and a focus on the lives of the slaves as well as their masters, made this *Spartacus* feel entirely new. While STARZ *Spartacus* gained immediate notoriety for its heady mix of highly stylized, CGI-enhanced violence with an unprecedented amount of onscreen nudity and graphic sexual acts, the series also offered viewers new visual, narrative and thematic aesthetics for the depiction of the Spartacus story and its received meanings. Audiences noted that the STARZ series both nodded to earlier Spartacus receptions, especially Kubrick's 1960 film *Spartacus*, as well as other recent popular onscreen recreations of antiquity, such as Snyder's *300* and HBO *Rome*. Yet at the same time the series applied innovative techniques of interrogation to current issues such as love and sexuality, race and class, and violence and spectacle.

As ancient Rome has always been a preferred cinematic locus for the display of various types of sexual extremes and decadent erotic practices, the STARZ *Spartacus* television series, in terms of representing sexuality, both follows some earlier conventions while also blazing new trails of onscreen eroticism (Cyrino 2014). STARZ *Spartacus* both promised and delivered plentiful nudity and sexual situations, in graphic scenes which were remarkable not only for their exotic nature, but also for their quantity, frequency and explicitness. Like earlier cinematic depictions of ancient Rome, sexual excess and perversion in *Spartacus* are also regularly equated with the extreme hunger for power and the use of excessive violence. The *Spartacus* series

utilizes several tropes to expose sexual excesses that are explicitly coded as Roman-style "deviance," including group sex and other non-private sexual acts; sex that crosses class hierarchies or sex with slaves; sexual compulsion, abuse and non-compliance; lesbianism and homosexuality; masturbation, voyeurism, incest, and sado-masochism (Augoustakis 2013; Raucci 2013; Strong 2013). While these tropes may have been hinted at or even shown in earlier screenings of ancient Rome, the STARZ *Spartacus* series escalates each trope to an extraordinary degree of expression in response to the desires of the increasingly affect-hungry viewers watching at home.

By foregrounding the rebel slaves and gladiators who rose up in resistance against the elite commanders of the Roman military, the Spartacus reception tradition has often drawn attention to the lives and experiences of the lower classes living in late Republican Rome. The image of "the common people" emerges in many ways in the various adaptations of the Spartacus story that have been staged and screened over the years: they are slaves fighting for emancipation, workers fighting for rights, artists fighting for freedom of expression. Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), in particular, underscores the realistically difficult lives of the slave families as they follow their leader: at the same time, the numerous optimistic scenes of their collective utopian society somewhat mitigates the narrative, both historical and cinematic, of their ultimate doom (Cyrino 2005). Yet this remarkable focus on characters from the lower strata of society (mostly fictional), rather than solely on the aristocratic Romans (mostly historical), has remained a persistent feature of the Spartacus reception tradition, and this perspective is also prominent in the STARZ *Spartacus* series. Scholars who study classical receptions in modern popular culture now justifiably consider the STARZ *Spartacus* series to be a provocative contribution to the understanding of how specific threads of reception are constantly being rewoven to suit contemporary tastes, aspirations and anxieties.

The first season of the series, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, premiered in January 2010 and unfolded in thirteen weekly episodes. The series' first season follows the aftermath of Spartacus's capture in Thrace and his training as a gladiator in the *ludus* of the *lanista* Batiatus. As Spartacus becomes an immediate superstar in the arena, he achieves the status of "Champion of Capua." The first season also introduces the *lanista* Batiatus as the financially strapped owner of a gladiator school vying for prominence in the saturated and ultra-competitive human spectacle market of Campania. Batiatus and his steadfast wife, Lucretia, will do anything for prestige and social advancement, as they claw and scrape their way to achieve place among the elite ranks of Roman citizens. So Batiatus stakes his future and that of his *ludus* on the raw talents of Spartacus, the brooding Thracian slave who agrees to

fight and become a champion gladiator when Batiatus promises to reunite him with his enslaved wife, Sura. But when Sura is returned on the point of death, Spartacus, furious, vows revenge on Batiatus and the *ludus*. The thirteen-episode arc ends in a brutal bloodbath in their *atrium*, where Batiatus is slain and Lucretia critically injured (but not dead), followed by the famous escape of the gladiators from the *ludus*. So the next season, if any, was to follow the runaway gladiators and slaves as they wreak havoc on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius and attempt to fend off the Roman military.

When the first season premiered in January 2010, the outlook could not have been rosier. In December 2009, STARZ had already given the green light for a second season of the bloody gladiator series, a full month before the show debuted to critical praise and record ratings. The new *Spartacus* was the upstart network's first true breakout hit: the series' premiere episode, "The Red Serpent," set a record for STARZ with over half a million viewers; audiences increased steadily over the rest of the opening season, with an average of 1.27 million viewers per show, which is a remarkable achievement for a network that reaches only about 17 million homes. But then in March 2010 lead actor Andy Whitfield, who played Spartacus in the first season with both sensitivity and strength and to much critical acclaim, was diagnosed with early stage non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. This somber news delayed the filming of the series' Season Two, so in a bid to keep the popular franchise going while Whitfield underwent treatment, the network decided to produce a six-episode miniseries prequel.

Spartacus: Gods of the Arena, also known in the press somewhat ominously as *Spartacus Minus Spartacus*, premiered in January 2011 and aired six weekly episodes. The prequel focuses on the rise of the House of Batiatus in the city of Capua before the arrival of Spartacus, as it traces the career of the Celtic gladiator Gannicus, the first fighter in the *ludus* of Batiatus to become the "Champion of Capua." Although the prequel was born of a sad situation—lead actor Whitfield's cancer later returned, forcing him to leave the series altogether, and he eventually passed away in September 2011—*Gods of the Arena* with its back-story narrative allowed the literal resurrection of several compelling characters from the first season and proved to be enormously successful, receiving positive critical reviews and audience reception. Set within a flashback as Batiatus lay bleeding in the *impluvium* of his house after the attack and escape of the gladiators under the leadership of Spartacus, the prequel *Gods of the Arena* takes the audience back about five years, as it explores Batiatus's rough relationship with his father, his constant struggles with the other businessmen and politicians of Capua, his interactions with his original stable of gladiators, and his deeply loyal emotional bond with his wife Lucretia in the early days of their marriage. *Gods of the Arena* reveals

how Batiatus and Lucretia develop into the gritty, striving characters as they are presented in the first season, as the prequel illuminates why the stakes are so high for them, and how they become so ruthless in seeking to attain their goals. Throughout the narrative of the six prequel episodes, numerous low-angle and point of view shots show the glorious new stone arena that is being erected in Capua to replace the rickety old wooden stadium: these camera glimpses serve as a visual parallel to the growing aspirations of Batiatus and Lucretia in their relentless desire to promote their gladiators, their *ludus* and themselves.

The second season of the series, *Spartacus: Vengeance*, premiered in January 2012, presenting ten weekly episodes. While it is quite rare for a continuing television series to recast its leading role with a different actor, Whitfield gave his blessing for the series to carry on without him and for the role of Spartacus to be recast with Australian actor Liam McIntyre. The second season *Spartacus: Vengeance* picks up immediately after the bloody escape of the gladiators from the *ludus* of Batiatus that had concluded the first season, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*. As the gladiator rebellion begins to devastate the countryside around Capua, and, as Spartacus and his generals free more slaves and gather more recruits to join their rebel army, the citizens and politicians of Rome become acutely terrified. The military praetor, Claudius Glaber, the Roman officer who had originally captured Spartacus and his wife and sold them into slavery at the beginning of the first season, is dispatched with his troops first to Capua and then to the area around Mount Vesuvius to subdue Spartacus and his band of freed slaves. Meanwhile, back at the House of Batiatus, his widow Lucretia engages in a deadly game for social ascendancy and control over her aristocratic rival, Ilithyia, Glaber's wife, which results in both of their deaths in the last episode of the season. But the main plot of *Spartacus: Vengeance* underscores Glaber's personal vendetta to kill Spartacus, as he becomes increasingly obsessed with finding and capturing the rebel leader. Aided by his fellow gladiators, including former champions Gannicus and Crixus the Gaul, the gladiator trainer Oenomaus and Agron the German, Spartacus defeats the Roman army in numerous clashes, and finally satisfies his own need for vengeance by killing Glaber. With his dying breath Glaber defiantly promises that his death will draw down the full power and wrath of the Roman legions and that Spartacus and his rebel slave army are doomed.

After the airing of the second season in the spring of 2012, STARZ announced that the third season of the *Spartacus* series would be the final one. The series' third and final season, *Spartacus: War of the Damned*, premiered in January 2013 and offered up ten weekly episodes. The narrative of the final season enters into territory that portrays individuals and events well

attested in the ancient historical sources, as *War of the Damned* follows the bloody conflict and final conclusive struggle between Spartacus and his gladiator troops on the one side, and on the other the Roman army raised and led by Marcus Licinius Crassus, whose enormous wealth was matched only by his extraordinary political ambition. Just as in Kubrick's 1960 film, the final season of *Spartacus* also introduces Julius Caesar, who is depicted as a young but ruthless and experienced soldier, and who seeks to increase his own political power by enlisting Crassus as a financial patron and by proving himself in the campaign against Spartacus. Crassus relentlessly pursues Spartacus, but the gladiator leader wins several skirmishes against the Roman forces as they become increasingly frustrated by their inability to defeat the rebellious slaves. After the rebels are betrayed by the Cilician pirates and after Crassus massacres Crixus and his army, Spartacus strains to keep morale high among his followers, as they learn more Roman troops under Pompey and Lucullus are on their way to southern Italy to support Crassus's campaign against him. In the series finale, "Victory," Spartacus decides to turn his forces to face the legions of Crassus and Caesar in a final last stand at the Battle of the Siler River, where Crassus gains a decisive victory. Although he nearly beats Crassus in hand-to-hand combat, Spartacus is mortally wounded by three Roman soldiers and is carried from the battlefield by Agron, while Gannicus is captured and crucified along with thousands of the rebel slave prisoners: the series is thus more authentic to history than the 1960 Kubrick film, which has Spartacus dying Christ-like on a cross with his fellow rebels. Pompey arrives after the battle yet steals credit for the defeat of Spartacus, thereby sowing the seeds of the power struggle between himself, Crassus, and Caesar that would ravage Rome for the next two decades, as it also provides an evocative link to the narrative material of the first season of the HBO series *Rome*.

What these two series, *Rome* and *Spartacus*, primarily share in terms of their entertainment impulse is the belief that the *idea* of ancient Rome—with its fabulously famous individuals and celebrated events—is far greater than the mere historical facts. Accordingly, following the recent critical and commercial successes of feature films set in the ancient world, television producers enthusiastically set their premium cable series in the most turbulent years of ancient Roman history to capitalize on this very idea: the spectacular luxury, glamour, violence and power of ancient Rome. The producers of both the HBO series *Rome* and the STARZ series *Spartacus* were only too happy to exhibit Rome's visually exciting bloody spectacles and its titillating sexual excesses, as they exploited the creative freedom allowed by the cable television format paid for first by domestic subscribers and then by home video consumers.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Thinking through the Ancient World: "Late Antique Movies" as a Mirror of Shifting Attitudes towards Christian Religion

Filippo Carlà-Uhink

The choice of a historical theme for a film is, quite obviously, not—or not only—the product of an academic, intellectual interest for a past society, event or character: representations of the past are always a product of the present; they translate into a historical setting debates, worries and issues of the time of their realization, they project back values and norms which are perceived as "universal" and "natural," they explain and found identities through references to the past (Stubbs 2013: 42–46; specifically on ancient Rome, Joshel, Malamud and Wyke 2001: 6–9). Their importance in acting, then, again in the present, shaping identities, values and ethics, depends on the fact that they are undoubtedly "one of the principal ways in which people form relationships with the past" (Stubbs 2013: 3). Late Antiquity is no exception, and is a field in which it is possible to track a consistent change in the forms and ways of reception in the course of the twentieth century. The nineteenth century and Romanticism had looked at this period mostly from the perspective of explaining, through the Germanic and Slavic invasions, the origins of modern nations (e.g. France from the Franks), with an approach substantially deriving from Herder's reading of the *Völkerwanderung* (the barbarian invasions) or on the contrary showing the "barbarians" as the

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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"killers" of a superior Roman civilization. In this contribution I will not deal with the representation of the barbarians, but rather focus on selected movies representing Late Antiquity as the period of the triumph of Christianity, from the last, Great Persecution to the "institutionalization" of the Christian faith as "state religion," showing how this topic, with its evolutions and shifts, represents a litmus of modern debates about religion and its public role, against the background of the secularization of Western society and of the very vigorous debates which are still of great import in many countries.

Late Antiquity in Film: From Silent Movies to the Age of Peplum

Early films did not show a very strong interest for this period—the few exceptions are mostly cinematic versions of popular novels or theatre plays, as Victorien Sardou's *Théodora* (which became Carlucci's *Teodora*, 1919–1921), or Wiseman's *Fabiola* (filmed in 1918, and again in 1949). The latter novel/movie deals with Diocletian's persecution of the Christians—but it is substantially the only such. In this phase, Late Antiquity does not seem to have played any consistent role in building or reinforcing, through the forms of its reception, Western Christian identity. While from the very beginning films represented biblical stories (Solomon 2001: 133–223), as well as stories of martyrdom and persecution, these were mostly set in earlier periods. This is a consequence, once again, of the models adapted to the big screen (e.g. Barrett's *The Sign of the Cross*, filmed three times before 1932; Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis?*, filmed in 1912 and 1924, and then most famously again in 1950), but also opens the way to original screenplays such as *The Way of the Cross* (J. Stuart Blackton, 1909), set in the age of Nero. Constantine, the first Christian emperor, appears in only one movie, *In hoc signo vinces* (English title: *The Triumph of an Emperor*, dir. Nino Oxilia, 1913)—in line with a trend which, starting with the Enlightenment, had seen a continuous downplaying of Constantine's significance in different media's receptions of Christianity (Goltz 2008: 279–281).

While Late Antiquity in general, as a time of decline and "dismissal" of imperial glory, could scarcely appeal to the Italian film-makers of the early twentieth century, concentrated as they were obliged to be on the rhetoric of *romanitas* (Wyke 1997: 17–22), the first Christian emperor was additionally an uncomfortable figure, having being accused in the course of the nineteenth century (most famously by Burkhardt) of converting to Christianity from cynical political calculation and of having "corrupted" the pure Christianity of the origins by transforming it into an institutionalized

"power religion" (see, e.g., his representation in *The Da Vinci Code*; Goltz 2008: 283–287). At the same time, voices critical of Christianity were too weak to achieve a complete reinterpretation of the emperor, nor would they be willing to endorse the emperor who, after all, was the first to officially convert to Christianity, favored the Christian religion and is still honored as a saint in the Orthodox Churches. Not by chance, even in following generations, only one further film has been dedicated to this emperor (*Costantino il Grande*, dir. Lionello de Felice, 1962). The lack of models (in early cinema, but also in opera, theatre, historical painting) has, then, additionally influenced the lack of development of "new" reception forms centered on Constantine (Goltz 2008: 288).

All the early movies are, as one would expect, very sympathetic to the Christian religion and seek to provide a Christian public with a strong foundation for their religious identity through a powerful visualization of martyrdom, faith and conversion. In this sense, the relative neglect of Late Antiquity is easily explicable: in addition to the above-mentioned models, which profoundly shape the choice of themes, the focus is on early Christianity, on the persecuted religion, with the many models of courage and perfect ideals it could provide. What the public had to be confronted with was the "pure" original Church, operating clandestinely, requiring its adepts to voluntarily face death for their faith. The sole exception is the only movie dedicated to the Emperor Julian, *Giuliano l'Apostata* (Ugo Falena, 1919), which did not enjoy great popularity, was clearly directed at an intellectual audience and, in spite of a clear sympathy for Julian's philosophical interests, still ended up stressing the triumph of Christianity and its intrinsic superiority to paganism, relying on contemporary scholarly literature which presented Julian's paganism as a sort of "imitation" of the Christian church (as demonstrated by Pucci 2013).

The years following the Second World War did not change this trend. While the early Christian religion was exalted in many movie productions, both from Hollywood and from Europe, the focus remained strongly on the early Imperial period. This is no surprise, since on the one side the existing models continued to show their strength in responding to and shaping the expectations of the public and the commercial interests of the producer, and at the same time the model of religiosity that these movies showed was still the one of the pure community of the original Church, in which having faith meant being ready to face death for it. This representation implied also a particular, gendered approach: in most movies women are represented as the "advocates for Christian conversion," resonating both with the general image of women in the society of the 1950s and 1960s and the prevailing

historical theories claiming that the spread of Christianity was largely mediated by women (Wieber 2015: 226–235; on women in—especially Hollywood—movies from this period, see also Joshel et al. 2001: 15–16).

All this is visible in *Costantino il Grande* (on which see Goltz 2008: 281–282). The movie revolves around the idea of the "Constantinian turn"—at the beginning we are informed that a world is collapsing, and a new one will be born from its ashes; at the end, immediately after the battle of the Milvian Bridge (and Constantine's vision and conversion to Christianity), the Emperor says to his soldiers that they have changed the course of history. This change is interpreted only from the perspective of religion: Constantine (always dressing in white, as do his troops, according to the dominating color coding), a tolerant Emperor, who hates the violence of the persecutions and stops them in 306 (while there is no mention of Galerius's tolerance edict), is struck by the courage and virtue of the Christians, represented mostly as "oppressed," and therefore as groups of poor, mostly elderly adults and children, animated by the highest ideal (Figures 14.1a, 14.1b). The conversion is once again initiated by two female characters: for Constantine it is Helena, the mother he never met and whom he encounters by chance during a trial of the Christians in Rome, for his companion Hadrian, the young, blonde and beautiful Livia.

Only a few contrasting voices appear in this field, and can be generally explained through the social, cultural and political context and the particular ideological alignments of their directors and producers. While the atypical "irreligiousness" of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Anthony Mann, 1964) has already been noticed many times, this is possible also because the movie does not deal with Late Antiquity, and therefore with a "Christian Empire." An absence of an explicit, positive mention (although Timonides wears a pendant with a Christogram, thus showing that his—and Marcus Aurelius's—ideal society can be considered informed by Christian ideals: Winkler 1995: 139–140; Theodorakopoulos 2010: 83–85) does not at all mean a criticism. A critical attitude towards the Church is present in very few movies, but this is never a major topic. *La vendetta dei barbari* (Giuseppe Vari, 1960), for example, shows a Galla Placidia who is very critical of the Christian church, considered from a Gibbonian perspective to be responsible for the crisis of the Empire. She claims that politics and religion must be separated, and considers Stilicho's confiscation of the goods of the pagan temples to be disruptive for Roman culture and society. As a consequence, the Church requests her death. In the movie Galla Placidia is nonetheless a cunning woman, causing the plunder of Rome; the hero, Olympius, will in the end leave her in the hands of the Visigoths, choosing instead to free his wife Sabina. More unconventionally, in *Teodora, Imperatrice di Bisanzio*

(a)

(b)

Figure 14.1 (a), (b) Christian martyrs in *Constantino il Grande* (1962).

(Riccardo Freda, 1953), against the setting of a "metaphysical" and almost universalized Byzantium, stressing the universal value of the movie's "message" (Carlà and Goltz 2015: 223–224), the Empress Theodora is represented, very positively, as the heroine of the oppressed classes, struggling against the aristocracy and against a Church corrupted by power and wealth (on Freda's political background, in particular in reference to the glorification of the *Resistenza* against fascism, but also in connection to his *Spartaco*, 1952, see Wyke 1997: 53–54). Freda's Theodora is not a heretic, as was the "historical" one, but a pagan, and the patriarch of Constantinople in the movie continuously preaches the submission of the "working class" to the nobles, even if at the very end (through Justinian's prayer to God) a conversion to Christianity cannot be excluded. It is no wonder that the movie received terrible critiques, as, for example, by Siniscalchi, who stressed how the "historical" Empress, an incarnation of evil, even persecuted the pope (Carlà 2013: 249–253).

Shifting Attitudes: New Paradigms on Late Antiquity and the Authorial Movies of the 1970s

Teodora, Imperatrice di Bisanzio displays features which were to become much more common in the following decades. It is in the complex context of the 1970s and 1980s that things begin to change: the sexual revolution acted on the gender models so intrinsic to the "Christian movie," while the growing secularization of Western societies (Bruce 2002: 1–44; 2011) applied an ever-strengthening critique to Christianity—particularly of the active role of the Church in society and politics. As might be expected, this began to produce an effect in films, reflecting once again a societal change in the representations of the past. Contemporarily, a radical shift also happened in the academic and popular perception of Late Antiquity, which enjoyed a real "boom." The two aspects are not disconnected since, as underlined by Giardina, the perception of the Late Antique and its "barbaric" cultural products as "modern" must be read against the background of post-colonial movements, of the radical critique of a supposed superiority of Western society, and generally as a product of "political correctness." At any rate it is certain that Late Antiquity has started to be perceived as nearer to the worries and issues of the contemporary world, as indeed "modern" in narrower sense, as a true mirror of the late twentieth century (Giardina 1999: 158–163).

The two sides tie in once again since the criticism of Christianity is mostly directed against the political and social influence assumed—and still held—by the Christian church, and does not concentrate, therefore, on the representation of the early, idealized Church. The origins of the latter have been depicted so many times and almost never challenged (Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, 1979, is, in its own particular way, the only really relevant exception) because it does not present those issues of "contamination" of the Christian message with power which constitutes the bulk of the critique. Probably even more significantly, it is very problematic for a mass media such as cinema to transmit "uncomfortable" messages that contrast with popular knowledge and conflict with the perceived identity of a large segment of the public. It is rather the post-Constantinian Christianity "of power" which attracts the attention of the film-makers—i.e. exactly the Late Antique period, when the Christian churches became "institutionalized," the bishops rose the social and political ladder, influencing Christian emperors, even challenging their power (Theodosius and Ambrose being the most famous and popular example), and the formerly persecuted religion could start persecuting other beliefs—or even other branches of the same religious group

in the intensifying fight against "heretical movements" and the ever-strengthening urge to define an "orthodoxy." This strong connection of Late Antiquity to Christianity and Christianization in popular history is inescapable for any product of classical reception, and it conditions both mass products, and more "intellectual" experiments and authorial movies, as the next two examples will clearly show. These must be read in the broader context of the "decline" of historical movies in Hollywood in the 1970s and 1980s, represented only by few productions on American history (Stubbs 2013: 109–125; Russell 2007: 28–29), and "their usurpation by a European art house alternative" (Wyke 1997: 188).

All this does not mean that movies set in Late Antiquity are automatically anti-Christian in conception and execution—on the contrary, they can appear to be deeply inspired by religious feelings, while at the same time exalting the pure (and poor) Christianity of its origins against the later institutionalized Christianity of wealth and power. The best known example of this approach is Roberto Rossellini's *Agostino d'Ippona* (1972), concentrating on the last thirty years of the life of Augustine, when he was bishop of Hippo Regius, focusing on the pastoral duties of the bishop and his resistance to any form of power, prevarication and violence. Augustine's struggle for a just society, up to the point that he is willing not to discriminate against a pagan brother when judging on an inheritance, is set against the background of a declining world, in which over the course of the film ruins come to dominate the scene (Carlà and Goltz 2015: 208–209).

As a part of his "historical encyclopedia," i.e. the historical and educational type of cinema he produced for television between 1963 and 1974 (Rossellini 1987: 425–432; see also Brunette 1987: 253–264; Aprà 2000), Rossellini's *Agostino* is thus a reflection on Late Antiquity as a moment of social earthquake, a moment in which one world, the ancient one, was dying amid corruption, poverty and violence and a new one had yet to emerge. This was for him an urgent message to contemporary society, since Rossellini strongly believed in history as *magistra vitae*—and in this case more than in any other, since the director saw an explicit parallel with "his" Western civilization on the edge of the same collapse which had been experienced by the Roman Empire. Such a crisis implies a return to instinct and violence (Aprà 2000: 127–128; it is worth noting that Rossellini had dealt with Late Antiquity in the documentary series *La lotta dell'uomo per la sua sopravvivenza*, parts 3 and 4, 1970).

In Rossellini's own words, Augustine is in this context the positive example of the thinker who is able not only to oppose this violence, but, more, to try to rescue the purest, the most important and positive values of the dying civilization and to reframe them in the changing world. As such he is an

important model for the Western civilization that Rossellini saw collapsing in the early 1970s (Masi and Lancia 1987: 117–120). Thus, the movie opens with the death of Theodosius I and the division of the Western and the Eastern Roman Empires in 395 AD, seen as a turning point on the way to the collapse of the imperial structure. Nonetheless, Augustine's endeavor appears in the movie as a failure: Donatist violence is everywhere (and indeed Augustine's opponents in the movie are the Christian integralist monks more than the pagans), the church gets contaminated with power (Alypius, Augustine's friend and bishop of Thagaste, attacks the wealthy, powerful bishops, while praising the religiosity and sensibility of the sacred of the pagan Emperor Julian, thus revealing the underlying idea of a tolerant, open and "poor" Christianity), the collapse continues, and Augustine's sentences as a judge are not accepted by the people on trial. As with Socrates, to whom Rossellini had dedicated a similar educational movie, Augustine is isolated in his own society.

Following a realistic aesthetic, Rossellini appears sure of being able to represent historical figures "as they are," at least in the documentary film, while settling "definitively on the format of the 'great man' who is examined as a representative of his age, usually an age in which, according to the director, some profound change occurred in the history of human consciousness" (Brunette 1987: 254). Augustine becomes thus the *chiffre* of the entire decline of the Roman Empire. In this sense, the first part of Augustine's life, which is generally considered more "cinematic," because of the dramatic narrative of love affairs, his career as a *rhetor*, and his conversion, is here passed over in order to show the "daily life" of the bishop in a poor province torn by religious violence. The danger represented by the Donatists is above all a menace to unity, a unity and cooperation of mankind which is necessary for achieving security, wealth and progress. The last pagans may well attract some sympathy, but it is clear that, for Rossellini, it is Christianity at its origin that provides the reference model during the collapse of civilization (Brunette 1987: 311–312). Once again, Late Antiquity appears as the paradigm of crisis, and, in this sense, a direct mirror of contemporary society, while Christianity appears as its preponderant force: the real innovation which could uphold humanity but which ended up being contaminated in the process through the acquisition of wealth and social and political power.

Late Antiquity provided the setting also for Derek Jarman's first full-length film, *Sebastiane* (1976), an authorial movie by a director explicitly opposed to Hollywood's representational policies because of their censorship of homosexuality (Jarman 1992: 82). Famously acted in Latin with English subtitles (the title is itself a Latin vocative of the name of the protagonist, which makes it additionally look like a feminine variant, Wymer 2005:

37–38), it offers a new interpretation and vision of Diocletian's times and of the Great Persecution. Since the Renaissance, Sebastianus, already a character in *Fabiola*, had been represented as passive, feminine and beautiful, and in the twentieth century had become an explicit gay icon, "the single most successfully deployed image of modern gay male identity" (Kaye 1996: 87; cf. Wyke 2001: 234–237). Jarman was well aware of this, which is probably the main reason for his choice of subject: "Sebastian. Renaissance. Pretty boy smiles through the arrows on a thousand altar pieces—plague. Saint. Captain of Diocletian's guard. Converted, stoned, and thrown into the sewers. Rescued by a Holy Woman. Androgyne icon banned by the bishop of Paris. Danced by Ida Rubinstein. Impersonated by Mishima. In love with his martyrdom" (Jarman 1984: 142; see Wyke 2001: 237–238).

In the movie, as in hagiographic tradition, Sebastianus is the head of the imperial guards, punished by Diocletian when he intervenes to try to save Pancras from execution (not to be confused with Saint Pancras, another Saint of the Great Persecution, not connected with Sebastian), accused of starting a fire in the imperial palace and, therefore, implicitly (in reference to Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 14) of being a Christian. He is relegated to a faraway military camp (the movie was shot in Sardinia, and the set consists of desert landscapes, one isolated tower, and a ruined cottage (Jarman 1984: 144; 148), and the soldiers engage in training and different activities in a context in which actually nothing relevant will really ever happen (O'Pray 1996: 86). There he resists the *avances* of the commander Severus, "whose name combines Roman plausibility with obvious sadomasochistic connotations" (Wymer 2005: 40). Believed to be a Christian by all other soldiers, even if he is presumably not one or at least has developed a very personal and narcissistic form of religious feeling (the movie is intentionally ambiguous, but when he is alone, Sebastianus prays twice unmistakably to the Sun god: Ellis 2009: 37–38), he is finally condemned to death by a frustrated Severus—whose love pangs do attract the sympathy of the public.

Jarman is quite distant from the tradition concerning the saint, who was indeed head of the imperial guards, but, being a Christian, was arrested and condemned to death by Diocletian. When tied to a pole and shot with arrows he would nevertheless not die and had to be killed afterwards with clubs in the hippodrome (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina*, 7543). The movie, first of all, does not present Sebastianus as a positive figure: he appears to estrange himself voluntarily from mankind, and substantially appears to repress and suffocate his own homoerotic attractiveness (in particular to Justinus, who is also in love with Sebastianus), sublimating it in the adoration of a god who is, in his own repeated statements, physically beautiful. The Christian refusal

of the world and of bodily instincts appears thus unnatural and clearly wrong, even if Sebastianus attracts some sympathy with his attitude of resistance to violence (Gardner 1996: 40; O'Pray 1996: 84). Interestingly, the movie does keep a strong gender bias in the representation of religion, as in the movies of the previous decades, since Jarman's Sebastianus is embodying a "fluid masculinity," in which his religiosity appears as a feminine sign, as realized by his "opponent" Maximus (who calls him a "Christian slut"), in a parodic reference to the already mentioned role of women as "advocates of Christianity." Notoriously, Jarman later described his subject in unenthusiastic terms, betraying a further distancing from his "hero":

> Sebastian, the doolally Christian who refused a good fuck, gets the arrows he deserved. Can one feel sorry for this Latin closed case? Stigma Seb who sports his wounds on a thousand altars like a debutant. All fags like a good Sebastian. (Jarman 1992: 83; cf. Kaye 1996: 87, on Sebastian as "a prototypical portrait of tortured closet case")

While the most aggressive (and "realistic," O'Pray 1996: 93) character, Maximus, is surely a Christian-hater, it cannot be claimed that the movie shows a positive attitude towards Christianity, as this is substantially absent. Quite the contrary: Maximus is also expressing his hatred of homosexual experiences (he claims he likes boys when nothing else is available, but he wants to go back to Rome for the women, and thus shows another example of monsters created by violent repression), while a positive stance is represented in the movie by the couple formed by Hadrianus and Antonius (Hadrian and Antinous!). The ideal is therefore a world without violence, characterized by a free sexuality, which Christianity will not be able to offer. On the contrary, the film hints at the fact that the Christians are nowadays the persecutors of homosexuals, just as they had been persecuted in the Roman Empire (Wyke 2001: 241–244; Wymer 2005: 37).

As pointed out effectively by Pencak,

> At the very beginning of Derek Jarman's Sebastiane, the Roman Coliseum appears as a modern cardboard cutout. This image signifies Jarman's belief that we have only a one-dimensional, superficial image of the Roman Empire, particularly of the third [sic!] century in which the film's action occurs. We have viewed it either with Christian eyes or through lenses provided by Edward Gibbon of a "decline and fall" from the glorious era of the "Five Good Emperors" (96–180 CE). The cartoon serves as a theatrical curtain that when opened reveals a past in which sexuality is shown to be a major factor in Roman, if not all, history, with homoeroticism a largely underground, uncharted component thereof. Jarman makes the claim that sexual expression, repression, and

> aggression fueled both the rise of Christianity and the persecution which paradoxically facilitated its growth. (Pencak 2002: 44)

This might very well be true, but it is then important to realize that even with Jarman's approach it is impossible to set oneself free from the general significance of Late Antiquity in modern Western culture—from its value as a *signe*, in Barthes' sense, which is unavoidable because it constitutes the *chiffre* of recognizability which is the very precondition of reception. And so, Jarman's Late Antique movie does not cease to be a reflection on early Christianity and on the persecutions which characterize the Diocletianic period (and from the Acts of the martyrs as a source), even if it adopts a more critical stance. At the same time, it does not avoid the stereotype of a decline marked by "cruelty, introversion and paranoia" (O'Pray 1996: 85–86). In a famous speech, Maximus comments on the degeneration of the good old Roman shows and orgies, and on the current abandonment of the Colosseum, by referring to and comparing, in their Latinized version, Cecil B. De Mille from *selva sacra* (Hollywood) and Federico Fellini (an element of "non-synchronicity" which, according to Jameson (1992: 12–13), has the function of "a Nietzschean affirmation that there is no past, and thus, finally, no time at all"). Again, the stereotype is there to be "contested," since Maximus does not appear to be a reliable judge of aesthetics, and Jarman could hardly have found De Mille superior to Fellini (Fellini's style, next to Pasolini's, is clearly present in the movie: Ellis 2009: 30–36; see Jarman 1992: 83, "Alberto Moravia said, 'this is a film Pier Paolo [Pasolini] would have loved to have made'"; Jarman 1984: 165–166)—but the strength of the two aspects generally connected to Late Antiquity is such that even "subversive" discourses must engage with them, rather than promote a completely different view on the period, and this, as it will be shown, applies to all cinematic productions up to the present day.

Secularization and Late Antiquity: The 2000s

It is in the late 1990s that historical movies again began to achieve huge popularity—and in the specific case of films with an ancient setting, the trend was famously kick-started by the release of *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000; see Russell 2007: 156–182). This movie represents, more than *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, a shift towards a "de-Christianization" of the epic film, rejecting any reference to the Christian faith, and setting forth the entire story as the "inner journey" of the hero in a spiritual world which is completely extraneous to religion, and which has been connected to aspects of

the New Age movement. But once again, the absence of positive reference does not imply criticism, and the movie does not directly relate to the "Christianity of power," being set in the late second century AD. Furthermore, Hollywood productions had substantially neglected biblical epics for a long period post-1965 (Russell 2007: 188–189). Again, this trend was inverted with the production of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). That movie showed, at any rate, a changed approach to Christian religion. While the epic productions of the 1950s and 1960s started from the assumption of being aimed at a mostly Christian public, Gibson situated himself explicitly in the context of the "culture wars," with the purpose of evangelizing his public and calling it "back" to a stronger adherence to the Christian faith (Russell 2007: 187–208).

At the same time, on the other side of the Atlantic, the reappearance of movies set in Late Antiquity and dealing with the institutionalization of Christianity as a state religion, setting up a radical attack against a Christian church which had become the violent persecutor of other faiths and an agent of oppression and discrimination, came, not surprisingly, from Italy and Spain. These two countries have a strong Catholic tradition and a particular invasive Church presence in the public and political sphere, as well as having maintained a long and radical debate about the "Christian identity" of the nation and the role that religious principles ought to have in legislation. In Italy, in particular, the church's defeat in referendums concerning divorce (1974) and abortion (1981) and the new Concordat (1984), which deleted the earlier definition of Roman Catholicism as the only religion of the state, did not imply in the end a major reduction of the pressure exerted by the ecclesiastical authority on the political life of the state. This became even stronger in the early 2000s: significant features include the centrality of the integralist movement "Comunione e Liberazione" in Italian right-wing governments; the political and social struggles about new laws on artificial conception (2004–); opposition to so far unsuccessful proposals to introduce homophobia as an aggravating circumstance, and to the legal recognition of hate crime; the complete lack, until 2016, of any form of legally recognized union for same-sex couples; and, at a more symbolic level, the still ongoing debate on the compulsory presence of the crucifix in public offices and public schools. In general, while the political world shows a high level of "obedience" to the Catholic Church and its dictates, there are significant parts of Italian society asking for a substantial revision of the relationship between Church and state, and, eventually, for the abolition of the Concordat (e.g. Pollard 2008: 152–175). It is in this context that Claudio Bondì (significantly an assistant director to Rossellini's *Agostino d'Ippona*) made *De reditu* (2003), a movie which did not attract much attention, had almost no

commercial success, but was funded as a product of national cultural interest by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities (MiBAC). Once again, then, an "authorial" movie, which is interesting most of all for revealing shifting attitudes in the intellectual milieu. It is a filmic version of Rutilius Namatianus's homonymous poem from the early fifth century AD, describing his journey from Rome, where he had been Urban Prefect in 414, to his family estates in Gaul, which he needed to inspect after the Visigothic plundering. While Rutilius himself is unsparing in his criticism of Christians, and in particular of the monastic movement, this is not the main topic of the poem, which is in addition very fragmentary. The movie, on the contrary, builds most of its plot around this subject, transforming Rutilius's trip into a flight from the *Urbs*, where he feels endangered by the intolerant Christian community, and ending in his death at the hands of killers acting in line with this religious conflict (the question whether Rutilius ever reached Gaul, and whether he should be identified with the Rutilius to whom the *Querolus* was dedicated has no relevance here).

The references and contacts to Rossellini's movie are clear: the photography and the "landscape of ruins" are clearly connected (Carlà and Goltz 2015: 210–211), as well as its organization around one character, who is not the protagonist of historical events, proactively changing history and society, but is the symbol of transition and change—this time on the side of an idealized, dying world. In the 1972 movie, Rutilius's "hymn to Rome" is, for example, anachronistically quoted by the pagans immediately after the sack of Rome of 410 AD. But at the same time, the differences could not be greater: the atheist Rossellini still presented a criticism of "corrupt" Christianity from inside, praising the human (and humanistic) Christian faith of Augustine and his struggle at the boundary between two worlds. Bondì's movie, on the contrary, does not leave any space for a possible positive side of the Christian religion and of the Christian church, shown as unavoidably fanatical and contrasted with an idealized "Classical Roman-ness," peaceful, educated and cultivated. Thus the monks of Capraia, briefly mentioned in the Latin poem (1.439–452), are represented in the movie as primitive people, living in caves and throwing stones at Rutilius and his companions, in a presentation which strongly evokes the Odyssean Cyclops (Figure 14.2) and implies that Christianity has caused a centuries-long regression in human history (Carlà and Goltz 2015: 210). While this depiction must be set in a general context, at the end of the twentieth century, marking a passage from a dominant image of the Romans as "evil" and "opposite" (Winkler 2001, insisting also on the religious component) to a positive identification with them (Joshel et al. 2001: 10–11), films set in Late Antiquity had more often shown the Romans as a positive pole opposed to the "barbarians." What is

Figure 14.2 Stone-throwing monks, in *De Reditu* (2003), (dir. Claudio Bondì). Production: Nimar Studios.

new in this specific context is that now "Roman" means traditional, classical (and pagan) culture, and not the Christian empire of Constantine, Theodosius, and their successors (as, e.g., in the Attila movie meaningfully titled *The Sign of the Pagan*, dir. Sirk, 1954, in which Attila dies, in the end, struck by a dagger which, at the end of the movie, projects on his body a shadow in the shape of a cross), while the "barbarians" are not the Goths or the Huns anymore, but fundamentalist Christians within.

The idea that the institutional Christianity of Late Antiquity, powerful and corrupted, contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire, is not exclusive to "elite" films by Bondì and others, but appealed in the early 2000s to different directors, and can be found in real "blockbusters," too. While some movies, again, deleted the "traditional" references to the positive role of Christian religion (and thus, e.g., the 2001 *Attila* by Lowry does not show the meeting between the Hunnic king and pope Leo the Great), a movie such as *King Arthur* (Fuqua, 2004) shows some alignment to *De reditu*. The main message of the film is different: Late Antiquity is not seen in the perspective of crisis and death of civilization, but rather in the more "Herderian" sense of the development of new "youthful" forces bringing about a new culture (the same message is contained in *The Last Legion*, dir. Lefler, 2007, but there Christianity is not mentioned at all, and Ambrosinus–Merlin is a Druid). The movement is therefore, as in *Gladiator*, not "outwards," but "back home," in search for the "freedom" to build a new, and personally owned, political community (Stubbs 2013: 130). The hero of the movie, Artorius Castus (Lucius Artorius Castus is historically known

from inscriptions to have been active in Britain at the end of the second century AD, and he has been presumed to be the "historical model" of king Arthur, even if this is no more than speculation: Higham 2002: 74–76), who will become king Arthur, is initially a Christian, even if he represents a tolerant and "humanistic" Christianity (as represented by the priest Pelagius, who will be opposed in Rome by the pope). Still, he will later be confronted with the corruption and violence of the Church, represented by Germanus, a cinematic version of Germanus of Auxerre, who did visit Britain and, in the hagiographic tradition, led a victory in 429 against the Picts and Saxons (Constantius of Lyon, *Life of Germanus,* 17–18), although the film is set fictionally in 467 AD, when the historical Germanus had already died, and has him die in the battle (on Germanus's role in the Arthurian legend, Higham 2002: 128–136). The Church is also represented by Marius Honorius, the father of Alecto, who is already known to be potentially the next pope, revealing themes of nepotism and parochialism. Arthur will therefore adhere to the "natural," pure (and pagan) faith of the Picts/Woads, and will marry Guinevere in nature and not in a church (Carlà and Goltz 2015: 211).

A few years later, the Spanish director Alejandro Amenábar produced his *Agora* (2009). The release of the movie, revolving around the figure of the Late Antique pagan philosopher Hypatia and her murder by a Christian mob, was accompanied by huge polemics, with many Christian groups asking for its restriction—not by chance, the countries where the films had the biggest difficulties in finding a distributor were, after Spain, Italy and the United States (but see Moschini 2011: 30 for possible other reasons for this difficulty). *Agora* sends a strong message, already obvious in *De reditu,* to the public post-9/11, making it clear that Late Antiquity did represent a collapse of civilization and a regression in history into a "Dark Age" (contrary to any reevaluation of the period or its description as a phase of "transition," more common in scholarly literature). It emphasizes that the main reason why this happened was growing religious fanaticism, seen increasingly as a danger and as the main component in the "clash of cultures." The idea of a historical delay caused by this religious evolution is strengthened by the fact that Hypatia in the movie discovers the elliptical movement of the planets, something that she does not divulge and, we are informed at the end of the film, will only be "rediscovered" by Kepler twelve centuries later (the representation of Hypatia's astronomical discoveries is an original invention of the movie, Sharpe 2012: 35–39)—a fact that the spectators learn together with the revelation of the beatification of the "evil" bishop Cyril.

But while *De reditu* proposes a quite simple and dichotomized structure of pagans and Christians, *Agora* is more nuanced. Pagans, Christians and

Jews all appear to be on a path of radicalization that leads them to the worst atrocities, while only Hypatia seems to maintain the necessary lucidity to understand what is going on, and in the end dies because of it. As formulated by Moschini:

> The tension between Pagans, Christians and Jews subtly escalated from blasphemy to individual crime from all sides, to an extent that it is impossible to assume whose fault it is. Each of the three faiths is eventually shown committing collective mass murder in the streets of Alexandria, all equal in horror. The stigmatisation of Christians felt by those critics might relate more to the fact that the Christians were the ultimate victors in this strife, rather than by any anti-Christian ideology embedded within the film. (Moschini 2011: 30–31; cf. Sharpe 2012: 41)

Nonetheless, it is necessary to emphasize that a general message against religious integralism (i.e., the opposite of secularism) and excessive involvement of religion in politics and society within a Spanish cultural context means automatically, even independent of the director's and producers' wishes, an attack on the position of the Catholic Church. As already mentioned, the Spanish political context of the early twenty-first century is comparable to the Italian one, resulting in hot debates about the public role of Christianity and the necessity of respecting Christian ethics in legislation especially during the years of government of the socialist José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004–2011), and a still unsolved discussion on the responsibilities of the Church during the years of Franco's dictatorship. Particularly significative are thus the representatives of Christianity—mostly the *parabolani*—who in the movie appear always dressed in black, visually evoking, to a contemporary public, the image of the Taliban, thus tying the historical movie to an actual political context. Their use of stoning to kill is also in line with contemporary images of Islamic law. It has also been noted that the most integralist Christians, Cyril and Ammonius, are both played by Near Eastern actors (Paul 2013: 232).

Agora is not a unique film in its cultural context: a few years before, *Kingdom of Heaven* (Ridley Scott, 2005) focused on the twelfth century and on the Crusades to propose a hero, Balian, who hates all fanaticism and tries to establish in Jerusalem an anachronistic tolerant world of religious pluralism (Stubbs 2013: 131–132). The growth of fundamentalism is thus the "death of reason"—Hypatia, seen as the last ancient philosopher, is unmistakably atheist and not pagan; she endeavors to understand with reason the universe and its laws, and for this she is killed. The destruction of the Serapaeum of 391 AD, represented at the end of the first part of the movie, becomes also the destruction of the library of Alexandria because its contents are incompatible

with the "new" faith. The loss of culture and education, the collapse of civilization, evokes different historical "destructions of books," as under the Nazis (cf. Paul 2013: 235–237). No resistance is offered either by Orestes, who must bow to the new power of Christianity for political purposes, nor by Synesios of Cyrene, Hypatia's scholar-pupil. The latter is convinced that knowledge is what differentiates man from the animals, but ends up becoming himself more and more intolerant—it is quite a pity, indeed, that the movie renders him quite one-dimensional, losing the contradictions, nuances and intellectual challenges both of the historical Synesios and of his character in reception (seen in Stefan Andres' novel *Die Versuchung des Synesios*, 1971).

The choice of Hypatia as a protagonist is not surprising: the philosopher has actually been a symbol of rationalism and classical education against Christian faith (and integralism) since the Enlightenment (Dzielska 1995: 1–8). In particular, Charles Kingsley's novel *Hypatia* (1853, see Dzielska 1995: 8–11), a violent attack against Catholicism and the corrupt Christianity "of power," seems to have played a role in the conception of the movie. It too revolves around the pagan philosopher, the Christian monk Philammon, and the prefect Orestes, here represented as intriguing to become emperor. It also involves the Jewish community in the plot, particularly in the characters of Raphael and Miriam (it might be worth noticing that it was directly in response to this novel that Wiseman wrote *Fabiola*, which represents, as already said, an extremely important reference point in the cinematic representations of Christianity and Late Antiquity). The first years of the twenty-first century, even before Amenábar's project, saw a consistent revival of Hypatia, both in scholarship and in reception (with the publication, e.g., of two historical novels, Sharpe 2012: 33).

Hypatia has also been used in more recent years as an important symbol by the feminist movement (Moschini 2011: 32; Paul 2013: 234–235), and indeed the movie, by portraying a woman philosopher as the last bastion of resistance of the balanced and tolerant classical civilization proposes a subversive message when compared to the mentioned role of women in the epic movies of the 1950s (Wieber 2015: 237–240). The idea of an incompatibility of science and religion, and the gender shift, nonetheless provoked a swift reaction.

Conclusion? Signs of a Christian Comeback

An ongoing debate in the sociology of religions asks whether the process of secularization has been reversed in recent years (against this idea, but not completely convincingly, Bruce 2001: 202–223; 2002: 229–241).

What is certain is that religious, and particularly Christian, groups seem to have developed a much stronger, and more aggressive, reaction to possible criticism. Not only do movements such as the French "La Manif pour tous" engage socially and politically in a strong resistance to social and political liberalization and against movements for equality, but the post-9/11 environment has also brought about a strengthening opposition to Islam in all its different variants. Such reaction is visible also in movies, and not only in the already mentioned *Passion of Christ*, but also in the representation of Late Antiquity, as demonstrated by the—in reality not very successful—film *Decline of an Empire* (2014, dir. Michael Redwood). This movie, focusing on the figure of St. Catherine of Alexandria and possibly a product of the new-born popularity of Constantine as a result of his jubilees (Goltz 2008: 278–279), can be considered a direct response to *Agora*.

Catherine, according to the hagiographic tradition, was martyred by Maximinus Daia, here transformed, following the mistake of the *Legenda Aurea*, into Maxentius, Constantine's most famous enemy, his opponent at the Milvian Bridge, in spite of the fact that the latter historically was not a persecutor of Christians. The movie makes her an Arab (while the tradition considers her to be the daughter of the governor of Egypt) and a childhood friend of Constantine, who is not Constantius Chlorus's son, but an Egyptian orphan, fighting as a soldier in Britain for Constantius Chlorus and then in his "civil war" against Maxentius (there is no mention of any other emperor). Kidnapped by the Romans and brought to the court of Maxentius (weak and effeminate, following all Orientalizing stereotypes, and physically recalling the Maxentius of De Felice's movie) because of her incredible intellectual abilities, Catherine becomes an exceptional scholar, who knows all languages, all world literature and knows, in the words of her "teacher" Gallus, "every corner of the human mind." The hagiographic tradition does present Catherine as an intellectual, and refers to a debate, organized by Maxentius, in which she confronted the main pagan philosophers and won. This is duly represented in the movie, as well as Maxentius's passion for her. This is already enough to make her a clear anti-Hypatia, also because of her evident connection with Alexandria. Catherine and Hypatia have been compared many times in literature and scholarship (e.g. Allen 1985: 214–218), and it is worth noting that while Catherine never existed, many scholars do indeed connect the birth of this legendary figure with the Christian need to answer to the popularity of Hypatia (Dzielska 1995: 21–22). While Amenábar's Hypatia is a heroine of rationalism and criticism, and therefore of tolerance and respect, Catherine is nothing like this: she is the heroine of ascetism and of self-renunciation,

of perpetual virginity, of the loss of any kind of human passion—nothing can be as foreign to Catherine as Hypatia's relativism, since all her philosophy is about the Almighty One, and the Truth.

Catherine is more of a prophetess than saint in the movie, and this is explicitly stated in many moments (with Maxentius's jest on the impossibility of an Arab being a prophet, in clear reference to Mohammed, as a demonstration of the lack of any hostility towards Islam, repeated in the titles concluding the movie, which insist on the multiconfessionality of Catherine's sanctuary on the Sinai). But while for most of the movie there are no explicit references to Christianity—even if the story itself, and the presence of Catherine and Constantine are more than enough—these are obvious towards the end, when Catherine is killed on the wheel (against the tradition, according to which she did not die then and was later beheaded). This is represented in a completely unhistorical way as a sort of cross, on which Catherine is "crucified" and even nailed, and which is afterwards let fall from a high wall. Catherine is revealed in this moment to be a Christ-like figure, even receiving a thorn crown from a soldier who explicitly comments on her *imitatio Christi*, and the photography of this scene leaves absolutely no doubt (Figure 14.3).

Women appear again, in this movie, as the "advocates of conversion," but in a role which is completely different from that of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, the entire action is advanced by female characters alone, the only exception being a still rather passive Constantine. Catherine is challenged mostly by Maxentius's wife (who in the hagiographical tradition converted to Christianity, a story that is not in the movie); Constantius is induced by his wife to make Constantine his successor, and great attention is dedicated

Figure 14.3 The crucifixion of Catherine in *Decline of an Empire* (2014) (dir. Michael Redwood, 2014). Production: Katherine of Alexandria.

to a group of barbarian women in Britain, brave and strong, who regularly defeat the Romans in battle, and who will help Constantine. As we are told at the beginning of the movie, they rebel against Rome, which killed their husbands and wants to oblige them to venerate gods in which they don't believe. Indeed, they are Christians, and they venerate Catherine, whose literary works they read, smuggled by "female slave navigators"! Constantine's "symbol" is thus actually Catherine's symbol, the wheel, which she is already drawing on the rocks as a child, and which is used by the Briton women, who once again embody the Herderian idea of a rejuvenation of the dying Empire through the introduction of the new, young and powerful forces of the "barbarians." While dying, finally, Catherine has a vision of God who is, not surprisingly, a beautiful woman.

Decline of an Empire adopts therefore the new agency assigned to women in historical films, and particularly in *Agora*, but readapts it to a reading of Late Antiquity as the moment in which a new world is created (by Catherine, according to Constantine in the movie). Once again, Christian groups seem to feel a need to defend their religion, whose centrality in defining and polarizing group identity seems to be again growing, as occurs when social identity is threatened by major cultural change (Bruce 2012: 31–36). This means strongly defending, once more, a reading of Late Antiquity as the moment of an epochal change, indeed a positive one, and the moment of the end of the Great Persecution (interrupted by Constantine in the movie). The latter's rise to power seems not to have lost its importance as an identity-forming moment for modern society. On the contrary, it has acquired a new importance as a symbol of the culture clash and of the ongoing debates about the role of religion in civil society which occur across the Western world every day.

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FURTHER READING

The representation of Late Antiquity in films has not attracted much attention until recently: Carlà and Goltz (2015) focus on the representation of cities and landscapes, but the remaining literature concentrates rather on single figures or on single movies. Goltz (2007) and (2008) reconstruct the representations of Constantine in this fashion, and Pucci (2013) analyzes the only existing movie on Julian. Of the movies considered in this chapter, only Jarman's *Sebastiane* and Amenábar's *Agora* have raised much interest among scholars of Classics—most notably Wyke (2001) on the former; Moschini (2011), Sharpe (2012), Paul (2013) and Wieber (2015) on the latter.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Non-western Approaches to the Ancient World: India and Japan—Classical Heritage or Exotic Occidentalism?

Anja Wieber

That Western cinema left and still leaves its mark on national film markets worldwide—be it the Italian epic films from the silent era and later, or colonial cinema in different regions, or Hollywood productions over many decades—is a well-known truth. Traces of that development are easily to be found, e.g. among cinemabilia, as a huge Thai cinema poster of the Italian-American-French production *Ulisse* from 1954 I bought at an eBay auction some years ago proves. The experience of a Western-dominated cinema is aptly described by the African director Rahmatou Keita (born 1957) in an interview for the Internet page *Screen Africa*:

> When I was a little girl cinema was like magic in Niger. In Lakuruusu, my neighborhood, the Queen of Sheba and Cleopatra, who were African queens, were portrayed as white women. They looked like Gina Lollobrigida and Liz Taylor.[1]

Hence the question arises how non-Western cinemas approach European classics, if indeed that topic is of any relevance in their own film productions. Given the novelty and breadth of the subject I will confine myself here to exemplary films from India and Japan.

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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India—European Antiquity and "The Birth of the Indian Nation"

During his incarcerations because of his activities in the cause of Indian independence, Jawaharlal Nehru (later, the first Indian prime minister) wrote educational letters about world history to his daughter Indira. In one of these, dated from January 24 1931, he mentions his dislike for the arrogant Greek king Alexander. In his opinion Alexander might have been a great general but did not leave any legacy. By contrast, Nehru expresses his admiration for the king Porus who tried to oppose the invader. Furthermore, he stresses that Alexander did not conqueror the mainland of India, but only its northern region (Nehru 1957, 56–59). The Greek invasion of India has been part of the Indian upper class education of the 1930s not only because of the educational canon of British India and its European impact, but also because Alexander's campaigns took place on Indian soil. In modern times however, the intersection of ancient European and ancient Asian history could serve as a point of reference for the formation of the Indian national identity whereby filmmakers and actors, among others, became agents of nation-building. This can be shown by the following case study of one of the early Indian sound films with a connection to European antiquity.

Sikandar *(1941)*

In 1941 Sohrab Modi, a man of upper class Parsi background, directed and produced with his film company *Minerva Movietone* the epic film *Sikandar*[2] telling the story of the Greek–Indian confrontation by using Alexander's Indian name. Before he entered filmmaking, Modi, a great actor himself, had started out with theatre projects. Experienced in adaptations of Shakespeare plays in Urdu (a Western Hindi language and, as a sociolect, a marker of tradition, aristocracy and high culture) and also because of his resounding voice which, it is alleged, even blind people liked to listen to in cinemas, he became, during the 1930s and 1940, famous for period movies both as film actor and as director. As he plays King Porus in the film and another Shakespearean actor, Prithviraj Kapoor, plays Alexander, this extensive theatre experience accounts for the theatrical pathos of the film, alongside the impact Shakespeare's Roman and Greek plays had on the typical reception of antiquity as seen in Anglo-American epic films (Saran 2010 nos. 131, 177). On a visual level *Sikandar* recalls Hollywood epics such as Cecil B. de Mille's *Cleopatra* (1934) with which it shares lavish indoor settings in the over-decorated style of the Victorian version of antiquity. Although some scenes

are furnished with painted stage decoration, the battle scenes, especially with the soldiers' choreography and the highly trained elephants, could compete with contemporary epic films from the United States.

At first sight the film tells the romantic love story of Alexander the Great and the Persian girl Roxane (in the Indian version: Rukhsana) alongside his Indian campaign. Therefore, the plot answers the standard viewers' expectation with a happy ending: by the end of the expedition, Alexander marries Roxane on Indian soil, while being cheered by his soldiers. However, many of the film's components that are prerequisites of a romantic movie might well have been inspired by component elements of the so-called *Alexander Romance* (see also below *Alexander Senki*), the fictive set of stories about Alexander's life and deeds from multiple cultures and in many versions, produced from ancient times through the Middle Ages and into modern times. Nehru's letter to his daughter shows that Indians with an upper class education were steeped in certain branches of those traditions. In connection with Alexander's campaign Nehru brings up a request for help sent by the Persian king Darius to the Indian king Porus and traces that information back to the medieval Persian poet Firdausi (Nehru 1957: 57), on whose writing the *Alexander Romance* had a significant impact (*Alexander Romance* 2, 19: Darius's letter to Porus; Stoneman 2010, 24). Exactly that motif of the Persian ruler seeking the Indian king's help is also of importance for the film plot. Given the social background of the scriptwriter Pandit Sudarshan[3], who was a high-born Indian author, and of Modi, they both might have had access to Persian versions of the Alexander Romance.

In *Sikandar* a very daring Roxane follows Alexander incognito to India and manages to gain admission to King Porus (in the Indian version: Puru). From a conversation with a young, friendly Indian village woman named Surmaniya, Roxane learns about the Indian feast of Rakhi which is being celebrated at that very moment with the purpose of strengthening the bond between sister and brother (0:25–0:30). On this occasion, sisters tie a ribbon (i.e. *rakhi*) to their brothers' arms to symbolize their close relationships, and brothers offer presents and assistance in return. Besides, Roxane is also told that the relationship need not be one of consanguinity; every girl can choose a brother. Therefore, she decides to offer the *rakhi* to King Porus, who accepts the relationship after some hesitation, because he feels the need to apologize to Roxane, Darius's (a.k.a. Dara's) daughter, for not having helped her father when he asked for assistance against Alexander. As a result of their bond, he offers her gifts befitting her rank and promises not to harm Alexander (0:32–35). Later, when Porus comes into hand-to-hand combat with the Greek king, he stands by his promise and spares him (1:31). Interestingly, the *rakhi* episode with Porus is still to this day very popular in

India and is cited as very early historical evidence for the origin of the authentic Hindu festival called *Raksha Bandhan*. Although examples of that legend can be traced in internet forums, Indian newspapers, a children's book and an educational video,[4] I was not able to find its ancient origin. Considering the fact that sometimes cinema creates history (e.g. the *Roman salute* as neo-classicist invention, disseminated by cinema and interestingly also shown a lot in this film), the story might derive from the film *Sikandar*. Roxane's role as a bride-to-be instead of the woman who was actually already at that time married to Alexander is clearly to be accounted for by the laws of film-making according to which the future couple has to overcome some obstacles to become finally a happy pair. This is why one of the film posters presents a bridal Roxane looking up to her "husband" Alexander (Figure 15.1). Her shrewd plan, however, to save Alexander's life by tying king Porus to herself

Figure 15.1 Poster for *Sikandar* (1941).

(literally and figuratively) lends her more personality and character than she has in the *Alexander Romance* tradition or in the historical records. Early in that reception process she has been made a Persian instead of the Sogdian princess historically known, but mostly she stays in the background (Müller 2012, 295–303). However, in the later Persian romance tradition, partly oral, partly written, there is an Amazon-like woman, daughter of the Persian king Darab, named Burandukht a.k.a. Roshanak (i.e. Roxane) whose characteristics are reminiscent of the leading lady in *Sikandar*. Although she originally opposes Alexander, she marries him and follows her husband to India, to save him and to face dangers on her own (Hanaway 1982, 287; Müller 2012, 305). Hence it comes as no surprise that the Roxane of 1941 appears in the Macedonian camp dressed like a Mogul in trousers, a coat-like *choga* and turban, and by her fervent address encourages the soldiers to express their wishes for an end to the war (1:45:30–1:46:30), whereas the historical general Koinos, who convinced Alexander to terminate the invasion, is not mentioned. In the end, it is Roxane's interference that causes the mutiny that leads to the withdrawal of the Greek army and thus she saves Alexander, and India too.

Not only does the film *Sikandar* portray a colorful heroine in her own right, a character who would win a female audience's favor, but more importantly Roxane's strategy to keep Porus from killing Alexander is a narrative device to make the defeat caused by the foreign intruder much more bearable for Indian cinemagoers. The implicit message is that Porus could have obtained an Indian victory. Instead he has decided to stay true to his promise and to respect the traditions of his own culture. Even today, Porus is still an Indian national hero and the Internet offers the opportunity for many amateur historians to argue that Porus had never been subdued by Alexander. In *Sikandar* Porus is worried after the battle that he will be remembered by history as the loser and therefore he is mourning. None the less he is so bold as to predict Alexander's future defeat by India (1:41–1:43). The impact the character Porus has on this film is enhanced by Sohrab Modi himself who applies all his histrionic qualities to the part of Alexander's solemn antagonist. No matter how attractive the dashing young Macedonian king appears, in the end he is morally inferior to the Indian king, as made clear by Porus's position at the top of the film poster (Figure 15.1). In one of their verbal exchanges, when Alexander, having entered the Indian palace in disguise, is unmasked, Porus asks him:

> What wrong has my India done to you? Has anyone from amongst us taken away food, clothes or your national pride? Has anyone among us forced you to go against your wishes? If no, then on what basis are you thinking about making Hindustan your slave? (0:54)

Considering the importance of the Indian independence movement by 1941, these words quite clearly bear a nationalist agenda, with the Greek invasion being a synonym for the British rule. The message is enhanced by the fact that both the male heroes and the leading lady Roxane (Vanamala) were in real life devoted to India's struggle to free herself.[5] The idea of an original and nationwide historical Indian culture was constructed as a component of the process of Indian nation-building, (Schulze 1998, 115–121). This idea was brought to the screen in *Sikandar* by the pseudo-archaic village scenes that also offered the filmgoers of the 1940s an opportunity for identification, as they could recognize contemporary Indian rural life. In one scene we watch, in a nice montage, Indians perform their timeless daily work, e.g. water fetching, animal feeding or using the hand-spindle. Given Ghandi's symbolic use of the spinning wheel for identification with India and the boycott of English goods, the latter seems highly political. While doing her work the village woman Surmaniya sings about a sleeping flower girl in a beautiful garden who is robbed by a destructive intruder taking away all her treasures (1:02–1:06). As one of the spinners asks: "Do you know who she is calling a thief?" the other men gathering around dispute who is meant. When asked, Surmaniya explains in the manner of a teacher that she means India by the garden and Alexander by the thief, and denies singing a romantic song—to do this in times when one's own country is in trouble would be a sin. Within the story her words are a wake-up call (e.g. "Leave your house, your comforts and march to protect your country!" 1:05) referring to the imminent Greek attack, but they also conceal a modern nationalist subtext, hidden in a parable and followed by a didactic commentary. Moreover, the fact that songs in Indian movies serve as emotional intensifiers and cultural markers of tradition (Hogan 2008, 160–193) gives extra significance to the singing of this song and all the other patriotic songs (e.g. "May our country win. May our country win. India is our crown." 0:39) with which the cinema audience used to join in, and, at the same time, emphasizes the modern political connotations of ancient history. In this film the voice of India is, apart from Porus, a female one: as well as Surmaniya another Indian woman, Prarthana, prays for her country (0:38; 1:16). She talks allegorically about the enslavement of India that might be compared to the situation when a horse at war with a lion (the heraldic symbol of England) loses the fight by allowing itself to be mounted by a rider. She admonishes the listeners not to give in to the foreign invader (1:42: "And India's freedom will be crushed."). Prarthana, whose name is the Hindi word for *prayer* cuts the brother–sister tie early in the film, because her brother, King Ambhi, betrays the Indian cause by allying with Alexander (0:21–0:23). When leaving her brother's palace to join Porus her last words are: "I will try to retain the freedom of India."

As long as Indian films had to pass the scrutiny of the British censorship board, many films, from the silent era on, made ample use of mythical and historical themes to disguise their nationalist cause (Schulz 1998, 116–118). *Sikandar* was at first approved by the Bombay censor board, which might be due to the fact that in 1941 certain film scenes about India's call to arms (1:05–1:06; 1:20–1:21) and Porus's statement, "If some person becomes dangerous for the peace of the world and tries to control all the powers of the world, then it is every man's duty to face him" (0:38), could also be read as a commitment of loyal Indian subjects to the British crown to join the fight against Nazi Germany, on the basis of a parallel between Alexander and Hitler. Later on, when the situation became more critical with the Quit India movement and the war against Japan, the film was banned in army cinemas because of its obviously Indian patriotic messages. On occasion of a re-release in London in 1953, a film critic of the newspaper *Manchester Guardian* labelled the film an "Indian *Birth of a Nation*" to denote its epic qualities à la Griffith (Chowdry 2000, 141). But this epithet also gets to its heart: *Sikandar* supported the birth of the Indian nation and as such enjoyed many re-runs in Indian cinemas, even in 1961 when Goa struggled for independence from Portugal. As late as 1998, we see Michael Wood watching this classic Indian movie in the fourth episode of the BBC documentary *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great*. Alexander has not lost his appeal as an antagonist for the Indian cinema, even in post-colonial times: *Sikandar-e-Azam*, another film about the Greek king from 1965, starring Prithviraj Kapoor (Alexander in *Sikandar*) as Porus, connects ancient history with the Indo-Pakistani War (Wieber 2008, 161). Indian film culture of each period makes use of ancient European history and blends it with Eastern traditions to plead for its own national agenda contemporarily. Some of the techniques used, such as inserting fictive characters alongside with the historical ones, or references to contemporary politics, are common features of epics of Western origin, too (e.g. Nero is often identified with different dictators, such as Mussolini, Hitler or Stalin, or involved in contrived love stories).

Japan—Welcome to the Land of Anime With a Touch of European Antiquity!

In early modern times, Japan came into contact with the European classical heritage through merchants from Portugal and Holland, and Jesuit missionaries. But a deeper cultural exchange between Europe and Japan only commenced in the Meji era (in the second half of the nineteenth century). From then on Japanese officials and intellectuals began to study Western thought

systematically and came to Europe and the United States to absorb Western scholarship and knowledge. In this way they also learnt about European classics. Taking the example of Tetsuro Watsuji (1889–1960), one can say that he preferred ancient Greece to Rome, and included in his construction of national characteristics an equation of ancient Greece to Japan, which cultures he believed to have been connected by the Silk Road. In contrast, he compared Imperial Rome and its materialism to the Anglo-Saxon peoples, especially the United States. Watsuji's American–Roman equation, with its critical reading of assumed "national" traits, especially America's as well as ancient Rome's striving for imperial power, was highlighted during the Second World War (Inaga 2013; LaFleur 2013, 255–256;). During the occupation period after 1945 Western culture met ambivalent reactions. On the one hand it was of interest to the Japanese in the search to find an answer to the question of why Japan was defeated; on the other hand, it represented the occupying power. How far these experiences, together with traditional Japanese philosophy and other discourses, affected Japan's reception of European classics in popular culture is a current issue. With regard to film studies investigation has hardly begun. The following thoughts are to be understood as a contribution to an ongoing discussion on European classics in Japan through analyzing the reception of Rome and Greece in two examples of the Japanese-dominated anime genre: *Cleopatra* and *Alexander Senki*.

Cleopatra *(1970)*

Kureopatora/Cleopatra a.k.a. *Queen of Sex*[6] was an adult anime feature film, directed by Osamu Tezuka (1928–1989). Tezuka is famous both for *manga*, the Japanese form of comic strip, and the filmed version, *anime*. Being one of the founding fathers of these genres in post-war Japan he is actually addressed as the "God of Comics" (Power 2009). By the end of the 1960s, in a critical economic time for his film company, Mushi Productions, Tezuka tried to increase the company's profitability by producing anime feature films that might be considered a species of the so-called *Pinku eiga*, a hybrid between erotic and arthouse films. For his new type of anime films Testsuka personally choose the label *animerama*, a blend of anime, Cinerama and drama (Power 2009, 137).

In many aspects *Cleopatra* indeed turns out to be a mixture of genres. The film is embedded in a frame of time-travelling from a futuristic age to Ancient Egypt, combining live-action and animated elements: in a partly genuine set, bodies of real actors are merged with animated heads. The motive for the time travelling is to investigate the erotic qualities of Cleopatra. To some extent the opening scene could be read as an ironic quotation of the TV

show *The Time Tunnel* (USA 1966–67) and other science fiction period movies. To indicate the voyage through time, the viewer is given a short glimpse of iconic moments of world history, such as the Yalta conference or Columbus's discovery of America, with some Asian events interspersed. The turning point of European antiquity is marked by Christ on the Cross (0:09–0:10 YouTube version). Low-angle shots of typical Egyptian buildings indicate that the setting in space is ancient Egypt, which has been invaded by the Romans, represented by monolithic blocks of marching blue-black soldiers of the SS-type who leave trails of devastation by fire, mass murder, rape and slain animals (0:00–0:02). The Roman invasion is accompanied by several cameo appearances of famous comic characters from Tezuka's universe (YouTube version).

Finally, Caesar arrives in Alexandria in a *quadriga* drawn by white horses. The conqueror has a green-blue skin and his very angular profile is shown in close-up, with a flashing eye and big nose that convey his aggressiveness and sexual appetite (0:02). Greeted by the mayor of Alexandria and his daughter, he grabs the innocent girl and tears off her clothes to expose her bare breasts. Then he carries the topless girl away like a parcel. So far, Caesar's character is being depicted as an ugly member of the Roman occupying forces with allusions to Americans, which will be later on spelt out in several scenes: Caesar smokes modern cigars (0:15), uses road cruisers (0:42) and attends gladiatorial games, the setting for which bears a greater resemblance to American football stadiums than to the ancient arena (0:46); during a session in the senate the chairman uses the gavel typical for chairmen in the US congress or American judges (0:43); in Rome, Caesar's portrait is seen everywhere, even in Mount Rushmore-style (0:53).

Back to the Alexandria sequence: on Caesar's entrance in the palace, we discover that his brutal behavior was meant to unmask local partisans. As a result, the girl is sent back to her father. At the same time Caesar interviews one of his undercover agents who is obviously a *ninja* (0:04). In a subsequent meeting of an Egyptian resistance group with plans to kill Caesar, spy movie elements are introduced. The leader of theses partisans turns out to be a she-villain, the former nurse of the king's sister Cleopatra, named Apollodoria. She has the idea that Cleopatra, who is faithful to the cause of Egyptian freedom, can seduce Caesar. But Cleopatra is not a beauty: she has a chubby-cheeked face with freckles and a button nose, although her body is voluptuous and she has been trained in the martial and erotic arts. Plastic surgery, however, will change her appearance so that she will take her place in history as the perfect beauty. Her doctor just has finished his work with a Frankenstein monster when Cleopatra arrives in his anachronistic clinic (0:10). He tells her that she will find how a handsome nose and a tight butt can have an influence

on history and starts to remodel her. In the end she is the perfect beauty, with a touch of a Geisha and a straight nose. This nonsense comedy actually can be read in particular as a play on Pascal's dictum about Cleopatra's nose, and in general on the timeless controversy as to whether Cleopatra was a beauty or not. Looking at the corresponding lavishly illustrated film guide, it is obvious that Tezuka did some research on Western ancient history, as the illustrations include well-known coins with Cleopatra's, Caesar's and Mark Antony's likenesses, some Egyptian artefacts, a timetable and a map of the Roman empire. At the same time, the film guide contains the Symbolist painting, *Cléopâtre*, by Gustave Moreau (1887),[7] "quotes" from the film that were attributed to such diverse painters as Toulouse Lautrec and Salvatore Dali (more modern painters are cited in the anime itself), and, of course, shows pictures of the ancient main characters together with Tesuka's self-portrait, an amalgam that proves his artistic ambition.

Apart from the pairing of Cleopatra and Caesar (followed by Mark Antony), there is another couple relevant to the film: an escaped Roman galley slave of Gallic origin, named Ionius, and an Egyptian partisan, Lybia, who both come under the authority of Caesar. Ionius is the typical muscleman who also has to prove himself in the arena and quite clearly resembles Ursus, not only a famous character in the American *Quo Vadis* (1950), but a leading character in a number of peplum films.[8] Lybia, who will support Cleopatra in her last hours, has a name that resembles Lygia, the female leading lady of *Quo Vadis*. There are other sly movie references—to the 1964 Cleopatra screen adaptation with Elizabeth Taylor (especially Cleopatra's entrance in Rome and her death scene), and possibly to the British camp comedy *Carry on Cleo* (1964). Another source of inspiration is most probably *Asterix et Cléopâtre*, the strip cartoon (1963),[9] as well as the film (1968). As a typical seductress the Uderzo–Goscinny comic Cléopâtre is accompanied by a leopard, a motif that can be traced to the silent movie era (e.g. Maria Magdalena in the 1927 *King of the Kings* keeps a leopard as her pet) and in ancient times to the followers of Dionysus, the maenads. The film version of *Asterix et Cléopâtre* replaces the leopard by a lion, but Tesuka draws a leopard, whose part has been elevated from a part of the *mise-en-scène* to an important minor role. He(?) has a name (*Lupa*) and an admirer (see Figure 15.2). Apart from the many anachronisms, the plot tells the conventional story of Cleopatra's relationship with Caesar and, after his assassination, with Mark Antony, although this Cleopatra is more a pawn in the hands of the Egyptian resistance than a self-confident subject. Hence, her mission to murder the respective Roman commanders fails because she falls in love with the men she is supposed to kill. In the end, however, Cleopatra is not able to seduce Octavian, because he proves to be homosexual.

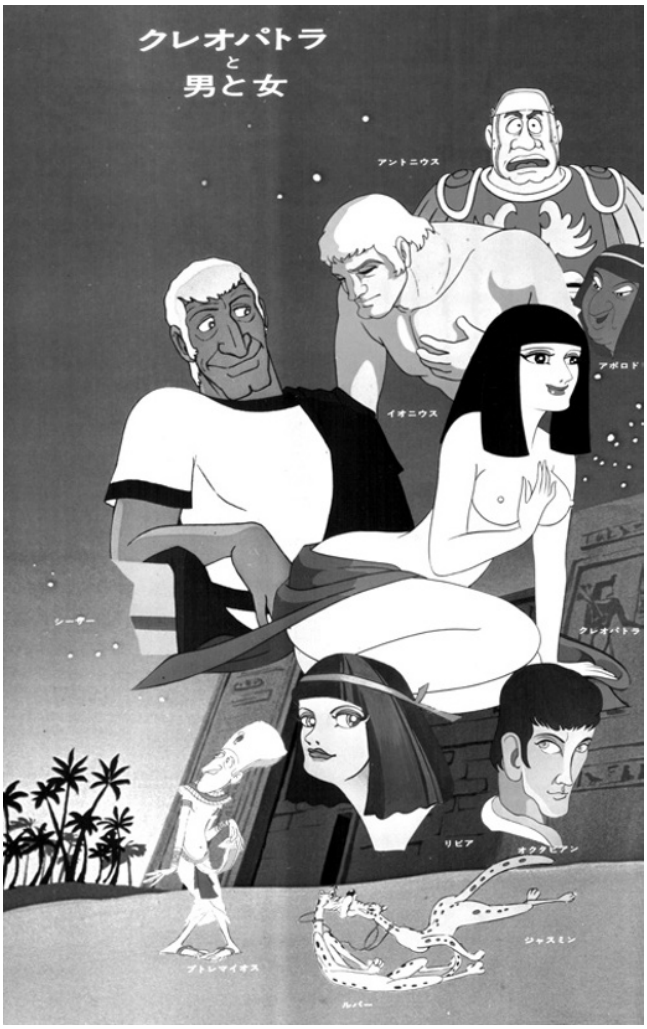

Figure 15.2 Poster for *Cleopatra* (*Kureopatora*; 1970).

Cleopatra was the second *animerama* by Tezuka, while a third in the series was made by another director. The two by Tezuka have in common the oriental setting: Egypt (and Rome) in *Cleopatra* and the Orient in general in *A Thousand and One Nights*; the third film, *Belladonna*, is a variation of the Joan of Arc theme. Apparently, the orient of nineteenth-century cliché ensures exoticism[10] and eroticism even from a Japanese point of view. Furthermore, as a notorious lover, the heroine Cleopatra plays a role comparable to that given to her in Western film development (Wenzel 2005): simultaneously an icon of sex with audience appeal and a tool to avoid censorship by choosing a setting far back in time. Likewise, the elements of

comedy and cartoon provide camouflage and help to minimize viewers' embarrassment (Gan 2007: 83). Therefore, Cleopatra's love scenes (e.g. 0:19–21; 1:05; 1:15) are more metaphorical and artistic than explicit. The fictional character Apollodoria, whose love-interest obviously is Cleopatra (e.g. 0:09; 1:16), serves to allude mockingly to the taboo topic of lesbian love. The Romans, however, who are in many (but not all) European or American film productions the chief protagonists in the battle of the Occident versus the Orient, turn out to be quite decadent and ruthless. This characterization enables unsubtle critical references to be made to modern Americans and their materialistic culture. At the end of the film, Lybia expresses in the style of "Yankee—go home!" her wish that the Romans would just clear off (1:25). Thus in this film Orientalism is intertwined with Occidentalism, i.e. stereotyping of the Western world, and at the same time Roman antiquity is mixed up with the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of Europe and the world.

Alexander Senki *(1999)*

Alexander Senki aka *Reign: The Conqueror* is a TV anime (13 episodes), directed by the Japanese Yoshinori Kanemori; character design is by the South Korean–American Peter Chung, who has become famous for *Aeon Flux*, an avant-garde dystopian science fiction TV show. *Alexander Senki* is based on the novel *Emperor's Fantasy–Alexander's War Chronicles* by the Japanese polymath and author Hiroshi Aramata and presents an anime-style biopic of Alexander the Great transferred into an undefined future. The series offers a genre mish-mash of fantasy and science fiction with historical and ahistorical details (Pomeroy 2008: 105–111). On the visual level the series quotes *Star Wars* movies and Sci Fi TV shows such as *Babylon 5* and *Dune*, but also combines historical costumes and props with modern ones. A crescent moon and star on a green background—the emblem of the Islamic world—constitute the flag of ancient Persia, while the Greek cavalry has horse covers in blue and white that evoke the national colors of modern Greece. Eurydice and Roxane are dressed in classical Greek costumes, whereas Alexander and his friends (Hephaistion, Cleitus, Philotas and Ptolemy) wear the futuristic version of a very minimalistic peplum style for ancient musclemen, with lots of bare skin—a sort of mankini with shoulder pads from the 1980s. Hephaistion, however, sometimes looks like a Greek ninja and Ptolemy wears the mask of a Harlequin. Apart from the sheer pleasure of creating a visual style of its own the designer may have been aiming to assist viewer recognition of unfamiliar ancient historical personae. Further, some of the leading characters, although historical, are represented

in the familiar TV trope of the five-man band, with Alexander as the superhero and leader, Cleitus as the muscleman, Philotas as the voice of reason and Ptolemy as the perpetually unlucky fellow (he is caught on the friends' secret mission to the Persian court and has to be saved from a nasty torture in Episode 3). Only the female companion is fictional: the amazon-like warrior Cassandra who is simultaneously a secret agent of her uncle Aristotle and a loyal friend and counselor of the king. While the philosopher and royal tutor Aristotle did have a niece named Hero, the behavior of Cassandra, especially her use of the Indian throwing weapon, the chakram (e.g. Episode 9), emulates the leading character Xena, the Warrior Princess, from the fantasy TV show of the same name. Unlike her mythical predecessor, people listen to this Cassandra: she is the one who explains the prophecy of the Gordian knot to Alexander and his friends (Episode 7).

Not by coincidence, Alexander is to be recognized by an *A* on his chest, sometimes a tattoo, sometimes on his armor, a symbol that clearly resembles the Superman logo. Aristotle himself has a touch of Mephisto, whereas the philosopher Diogenes seems to imitate the costume of Buster Keaton in his last film *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and talks in the English-dubbed version in the manner of the Jedi Master Yoda from *Star Wars*. Fan reviewers have in particular complained about the unusual look of the series and the male nudity. In an interview,[11] Peter Chung names, apart from Japanese animation artists, the Viennese expressionist painter Egon Schiele and the French cartoonist Moebius (pen name of Jean Giraud, died 2012) as his biggest influences. With Schiele, Chung shares a preference for elongated, nude bodies and expressive features: both display bodies and faces viewed from unusual positions or angles (e.g. overhead or from an oblique perspective). Sometimes the anime characters' androgyny seems to imitate Audrey Beardsley's style.All these modern allusions should not, however, be thought to imply that the show does not make ample use of ancient details. Quite the contrary: the designs of two main characters—to start with a set of examples—refer to their historical surnames: Cleitus, whose ancient epithet is *Melas* ("the Black"), has a very dark complexion; the general Antigonos, the "One-Eyed" (*monophtalmos*), wears an eyepatch. Emulating the image reproduced on many coins issued by the Macedonian king, Alexander is seen in some scenes wearing a lionskin headdress, thereby imitating Herakles exactly as the historical Alexander did. The king's mother, Olympias, appears many times as a serpent charmer and witch (especially Episodes 1–5). Exaggerated as this characterization is, it nevertheless has a historical basis: serpents played a role in the Dionysian rituals which Olympias performed, and even Cicero writes in a non-fictional context about the queen keeping a serpent as a pet (*de divinatione* 2, 135). Finally, the way Alexander's father is

presented refers to a possible historical detail, because Philip's scarred face reflects the forensic reconstruction of the skull found in the so-called Tomb of Philip at Vergina.

Alexander Senki employs Alexander the Great and his/story to weave its known elements together with different plot strands. The young king's career and his successful campaigns to found an empire and to explore the edges of civilization are connected with Olympias's visions of her son conquering the inhabited world, and Alexander's drive for speed is a modern version of the ancient concept of *pothos*. At the same time, the whole account is embedded in the quest for the philosopher's stone, here called the Platohedron. Participating in this search are such different characters as the members of the Pythagorean cult (hostile to Alexander) and famous philosophers, Alexander's contemporaries, Aristotle (a man with a mission—to save the world from destruction and to own the Platohedron) and Diogenes (as amused bystander), but also Socrates and Plato, who sometimes even watch mankind from above like gods (e.g. Episodes 10 and 13). In the end a Brahmin priest proves to be a re-born Pythagoras whose pupils have tried to stop Alexander, the "devil king of destruction." Yet the philosopher–priest himself has come to the understanding that every destruction embraces a new beginning (Episode 13). This meeting takes places after both Alexander, who has grasped that his fight against King Porus is a struggle with himself, and also the observing philosophers have been carried away from the Indian battle field to the Samothracian underground cave where the truth of the universe is hidden, concealed in an instrument been created by Pythagoras and named the Platohedron. Aristotle and Diogenes witness Alexander being called by the shrine maiden, Olympias. Next we see him floating through a multitude of two-dimensional bodies—his antagonists, his victims, slowly coming to understand that he has reached the end of the world.

In one of his daydreams (Episode 8) Alexander, during a conversation with the architect Dinocrates (who, according to historical tradition, constructed the city of Alexandria), enters the Pythagorean dimension by a leap in time and walks through the future Alexandria, the city which he founded 100 years previously. There in the necropolis, he is falsely pursued as an intruder. In a hide-out he comes into contact with two grave robbers who plan to enter the dead king's huge underworld tomb to get hold of the Platohedron. At this point Alexander realizes that he is visiting his own tomb. His companions are baffled when he manages to open its entrance. Having passed many obstacles typical of the Pyramids, the group seems to fall through cubes into the abyss. Alexander finds himself facing the shadow of Aristotle and, against his tutor's explicit advice, he opens a seal and causes a flood that resembles the inundation in Fritz Lang's classic silent

movie *Metropolis*. This catastrophe, although only a dream, is a subtle metaphor for the lost tomb of Alexander the Great which has been sought through ages.

What has to be labelled as fantasy at the first sight could—like to the Indian narrative in *Sikandar*—be related to the *Alexander Romance*. Actually, many aspects of the modern plot might be traced back to that corpus (Stoneman 2010, 91–106; 110; 114–119; 122–127). A *katabasis* to the Land of the Blessed that may be compared to the animated dream sequence (Episode 8 vs. *Alexander Romance* 2, 39–41; Ogden 2010) is included, as is Alexander's undercover operation at the Persian court (Episode 3 vs. *Alexander Romance* 2, 14–15), and his philosophical conversation with Brahmin priests and their leader (Episode 13 vs. *Alexander Romance* 3, 6). When meeting the old man Maron (an offspring of Dionysus, here identified with Silenus), Alexander enters a glamorous Dionysian temple illuminated by a huge precious stone, which might be understood as the model for the Platohedron (*Alexander Romance* 3, 28). Alexander's meeting his first wife Roxane, a daughter of the Great King, at the Persian court is part of that tradition (Episode 3 vs. *Alexander Romance* 2, 22), whereas the historical Roxane was a Sogdian princess Alexander encountered on his campaign of conquest. Finally, the way Alexander's famous horse is characterized in the TV series resembles its nature as described in the *Alexander Romance*: not merely furious, but actually man-eating (Episode 1 vs. *Alexander Romance* 1, 17).

The fragments of the Alexander narrative that were known via Islamized sources in China and in Japan even before the introduction of European history have been the focus of recent research (Yamanaka 2012). The *Alexander Romance* already contains a good many fantastic elements (e.g. a myth of flying: *Alexander Romance* 2, 41). For these reasons it could have appealed as a source of inspiration for the TV show, especially as the author of the original novel possesses such an encyclopedic knowledge. None the less one may still ask what made the historical Alexander and the philosophical context interesting for a Japanese audience in the first place (cf. also Pomeroy 2008, 106–107)—regardless of the fact that the series undoubtedly also aimed at the world market where in many regions the Greek king is a best-seller. Alexander, while not the only possibility, is still an ideal protagonist for the concept of a hero's journey, a pattern of narrative used by many films and TV shows worldwide, including Japan. In 2003, four years after the production of *Alexander Senki*, two Japanese Museums, the Tokyo National Museum and the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art in Kobe, organized with the assistance of various Greek institutions an exhibition under the title *Alexander THE Great, East–West*

Cultural Contacts from Greece to Japan (Cherry 2010, 325–326). The main curator Takeshi Gotoh is quoted in an interview as saying: "We would like to trace and show the cultural exchanges and fusion of the civilizations of East and West which were brought about by the eastward campaign of Alexander the Great."[12] The theory that the cities founded by Alexander the Great contributed to that fusion is also one of the central ideas in a Japanese documentary in three parts about Eurasian empires, aired in Germany for the first time in 2004 (Wieber 2008, 161).[13] Taking this into consideration, the ending of the last episode of *Alexander Senki* (Episode 13: *Act XIII: The Prophecy Come to Pass*, alternative title: *Catharsis*, which receives a verbatim translation in Japanese: *Katarushisu*) might have a specific meaning. Back from his Indian campaign, Alexander in Egypt (historically, this should be Babylon) runs into a young mathematician who is busily writing down formulae on the ground and who lets the king know that he is blocking the sunlight. This incident is a variation of the anecdotal, more legendary than true, encounter between the philosopher Diogenes and Alexander (Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* 5, 92). While Alexander is immersing himself in these formulae, Ptolemy fails in his attempt to kill the king. Cassandra, who has come to the king's defense, is told that Alexander is looking at the creation of the world he has destroyed. In a simulated panning shot, the young mathematician is again presented. The adolescent's pony-tail and his clothing make him, apart from his large eyes, look like a Chinese from the nineteenth century. Next, the boy meets a man who resembles a monk. The elder asks the youth what he is doing and gets the answer that he is concerned with the theory of everything in the world; at the same time the boy produces a stone resembling the Platohedron from his clothes, leaving it behind on top of his sketches. In the English-dubbed version the boy's name is Euclid and the older man and the boy go away on a cart. Meanwhile we have also seen a tired Alexander climbing stairs in the shadow of the sunset, and eventually disappear. The hero's exit and his crossing of paths with Euclid denote Alexander's death and simultaneously his afterlife in Hellenistic culture, of which the city and its scholars such as Euclid were important mainstays. A Chinese-looking Euclid traveling together with a monk can be read as a metaphor for the transfer of knowledge from the Hellenized world to Asia. After all, it is widely believed (although the paths of reception are much more complicated) that it was the Jesuits who brought Euclid's works to China. In view of this and the themes of the Silk Road cosmopolitism, the last episode of *Alexander Senki* has the subtext of a *translatio sapientiae* ("transfer of wisdom") from West to East which is consistent with the various cultural trends in Japan mentioned above.

Conclusion

The films under scrutiny illustrate the creative reception of the ancient European world. In both the Indian and the Japanese examples, stories of world-famous historical personae, i.e. Alexander and Cleopatra, have been adapted. Since in the context of European reception those characters have already become mythical signifiers open to multiple interpretations, they work well within this new cultural sphere. Drawing on classical literature and on film culture of diverse origins, Western heritage and Eastern tradition are blended, sometimes in a sophisticated manner, sometimes more simply, but with different aims. Whereas the Indian film version of the Alexander story and the anime Cleopatra serve the purpose of dissociating the originating nation from the British Empire or American culture, the anime TV show about Alexander can (beside other readings) be understood as linking European classics with Asian culture(s). Classics are modernized, either by connecting them with a modern political agenda or by transferring them to anachronistic settings (be they present or futuristic).

This chapter only deals with a small fraction of Asian films covering the classical world, let alone other continents and their cinemas. Also, its time frame is very narrow. Hence there is a need for diachronic studies of each film culture. When considering references to the ancient world, prospective studies should focus on the question of whether classics are being shaped via direct or indirect reception; whether the knowledge of the ancient world has been transmitted by Western cinemas to other cinematic and television cultures; and also consider film genre. Other important issues are the way in which non-Western television audiences, cinemagoers and critics respond to films with classical content, and whether viewing habits are significant. Moreover, variations from original-language versions introduced in subtitling and dubbing need to be dealt with. It is also worth keeping in mind that amid globalization and multinational co-productions (for instance, Tezuka worked on a bible series for the Vatican) film culture can turn into bricolage. To quote Kipling: "there is neither East nor West!"

NOTES

1. *Screenafrica* (2011). Keita—a pioneer in Niger, http://www.screenafrica.com/page/news/africa/1633766-Keita-a-pioneer-in-Niger.Accessed August 26, 2015.
2. The story line of *Sikandar* as presented on the Internet page *pothos.org, All about Alexander the Great*, http://www.pothos.org/content/index.php?page=sikander-1941 (accessed August 26, 2015) slightly differs from

the film version now on sale. Apart from a time difference of some minutes, scenes about Alexander still being in Persia are included at the beginning of the film, whereas in the new edition by Shemaroo Entertainment they are inserted near the end as a flashback. Given the linear structure of the film this montage seems odd. Nonetheless, my film quotes will refer to the Shemaroo edition.

3. Filmblog by Shishir Krishna Sharma (2012), http://beetehuedin.blogspot.de/2012/04/kalam-ke-sikandar.html.Accessed August 26, 2015.
4. Verma P. (ed.) (2012). *Rakshabandhan: Festival of India*, 2012 (children's book), http://vedicempire.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=107&Itemid=27; http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/specials/Rakhi-The-stories-behind-the-festival/articleshow/2975222.cms; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kqhph0kewro.All accessed August 26, 2015.
5. Blog *Filmy India* (2013), http://bmmann-filmyindia.blogspot.de/2013/12/vanamala-entered-films-at-time-when-it.html.Accessed August 26, 2015.
6. The DVD which has been released in Germany and to which most of my citations refer is 26 minutes shorter than the original Japanese version (112 minutes); for deleted scenes cf. the Japanese version on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTEEtbxH9nE.Accessed August 26, 2015.
7. His paintings can be found in many Japanese museums; cf. the internet page of the *Musée National Gustave Moreau*, http://de.musee-moreau.fr/node/106 . Accessed August 28, 2015.
8. Cf. the internet page *Peplum* by Michel Eloy, http://www.peplums.info/pep10.htm.Accessed August 26, 2015.
9. In 1974, the first three books of the Asterix series were translated into Japanese, no other translations followed. However, Cleopatra appears not earlier than in the French vol. 6; cf. the internet page about the *Many Languages of Asterix*: http://www.asterix-obelix.nl/manylanguages/asterix-complete-guide.php. Accessed August 26, 2015. No information is available about the screening of *Asterix et Cléopâtre* in Japanese cinemas. If Tezuka had knowledge of the cartoon and the film, it had to be in a foreign-language version; as he had always been a great admirer of Walt Disney, Hollywood and European films, this seems highly likely.
10. Tezuka, for example, uses the Latin script, transcriptions of Japanese words and words of foreign languages, as markers of exotism in his manga (Philipps 2008: 74).
11. Solomon, C. (2003). Ace animator gets free rein on *Reign*. In *Los Angeles Times* February 3, 2003, http://articles.latimes.com/2003/mar/02/entertainment/ca-solomon2 . Accessed August 26, 2015.
12. Ishida, H.J. for GreeceJapan.com (2003). Alexander the Great, East–West Cultural Contacts from Greece to Japan, http://www.greecejapan.com/alexander-the-great-east-west-cultural-contacts-from-greece-to-japan/.Accessed August 28, 2015.
13. Cf. the internet page *Anime no Tomodachi* (society for Japanese pop culture in Germany), http://www.tomodachi.de/html/ant/service/jpn_movies/alexander.html.Accessed August 26, 2015.

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PART III

FILM PRODUCTION AND ANCIENT WORLD CINEMA

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Man to Man: Music and Masculine Relations in *Ben-Hur* (1925 and 1959)

Stephan Prock

The rise of the biblical epic in Hollywood cinema after the Second World War received its kick-start when Cecil B. DeMille, returning to his silent era roots, directed *Samson and Delilah* in 1949. Nominated for five Academy Awards, winning two, its impact on biblical epics of the 1950s was in no small part due to its box office take: bringing in more than 11 million dollars, the film was the top moneymaker of 1950. The film's success helped propel a reemergence of the genre and was followed quickly by films like *Quo Vadis* in 1950 (with a score by Miklós Rósza), *The Robe* (1953), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) and another DeMille offering, *The Ten Commandments*, in 1956. Closing out the decade was MGM's spectacular remake of *Ben-Hur* in 1959 directed by William Wyler and starring Charlton Heston as Judah Ben-Hur, with Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* following close on its heels in 1960. The artistic and box office success of these films helped pave the way for the more general historical epics of the 1960s like Anthony Mann's *El Cid* (1961), David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963), and Carol Reed's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965).

The (re)turn to representations of classical antiquity in post-war Hollywood was motivated by a number of social and economic factors[1] too complex to address fully in this space, but one element shared by all of these "epic" films

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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is the consistent focus on narratives of male subjectivity and becoming. In this regard, they can be seen as part of a larger trend connecting post-war film genres whose narratives and concerns at first glance might seem disparate. In Westerns, for example, such as *High Noon* (1952), *Red River* (1948), or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), questions of moral uncertainty and the aftereffects of physical and/or emotional trauma must be negotiated by the film's male characters individually and collectively in predominantly homosocial contexts. Seen from this perspective, one can discern thematic links between these films and films like David Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) or Fred Zinneman's *From Here To Eternity* (1953) that directly invoke, within brutalizing homosocial contexts, traumatic aspects of the war itself and their lingering effects. In one sense then, the traumatic effects of the Second World War and its impact on American men becomes a running undercurrent throughout the post-war period and straddles a number of seemingly divergent film genres.[2] Wyler himself addressed the issue of war trauma and its after-effects head-on in his film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) in which the three male leads, returning home after the end of the war, confront together and as individuals the emotional, psychological and physical horrors they have endured overseas. Many of these themes are obvious in the narrative of *Ben-Hur*: the moral dilemma Ben-Hur must confront in his friendship with Messala who asks him to side with Rome against the Judeans; the emotional trauma of betrayal when Messala falsely imprisons him and his family; the physical abuses of his imprisonment, the forced march through the desert, and the brutality of life as a galley slave; the spiritually corroding effects of hatred and revenge; the horror of the disfiguring disease of leprosy endured by his mother and sister, which he is powerless to alleviate.

This general shift in the narrative concerns of American cinema in the aftermath of the Second World War and throughout the 1950s was accompanied by major shifts in the production and distribution of movies as a whole. Precipitated by the loss of their ownership of movie theatres in 1948, and thus of the guaranteed venues for the distribution of their films, the major studios experienced unprecedented financial pressures. Many of the blockbuster epics, like MGM's *Ben-Hur*, were make-or-break propositions for their respective studios, who poured massive resources into these films hoping that their success would bring in enough money to underwrite the next projects.[3] These new financial realities, coupled with changes in musical styles and tastes in the 1950s, the aesthetic turn toward "realism" in film representation and acting, and the expense of producing orchestral scores led to an inexorable decline in the traditional Hollywood underscore. Except, that is, in the blockbuster epics where these scores were seen as not only

appropriate to the content of the films, but necessary for conveying their grandeur, emotional range and dramatic scale.

But if a turn to the past allowed the traditional film underscore to survive into a new era with a new set of concerns involving masculinity and male subjectivity, it also posed a problem for musical representation. If, as writers like Claudia Gorbman (1987) have argued, music in the underscore in classical Hollywood cinema was "first and foremost … a signifier of emotion" and typically associated with feminine emotional excess, how might composers convey the appropriate gender norms typical of the era in films whose narratives primarily focused on the male subject and intramasculine relations? While the seemingly fixed boundaries of masculinity in the 1950s began to erode somewhat in cinematic portrayals of the 1950s with the appearance of the emotionally conflicted boy/men actors like James Dean, Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift, the biblical epics themselves were populated with he-men such as Victor Mature, Richard Burton, Kirk Douglas and, above all, Charlton Heston. The common thread among the characters these actors portray is their inability, reinforced by masculine stereotypes, to come to terms with or verbally articulate their conflicted inner lives or their responses to the traumas they endure, generally opting for action over angst. Moreover, in films like the historical epics, whose narratives are overwhelmingly played out through *male* interactions rather than within the traditional love story of the Hollywood melodrama, the question of how to underscore male interiority and male intersubjectivity becomes particularly acute.

In what follows I will explore how these issues play out within the context of *Ben-Hur*. I will focus on how Rózsa's score negotiates the complex intersections of music with issues of trauma, the articulation of masculine interiority, and the representation of male inter-subjectivity. At the same time, I will be using Fred Niblo's 1925 silent version of *Ben-Hur*, with music by William Axt and David Mendoza, as something of a foil, a counterbalance if you will, to help illustrate the differences in notions of gender and, in particular, of masculinity between the two films, and changes in the musical depictions of male subjectivity in the two different eras. Although my primary focus will remain on the 1959 film, differences in musical settings often reveal even more clearly unarticulated conceptions in post-war America regarding gender and masculinity and the types of male relationships that evolve across time, partly in response to major upheavals that have profound effects on society. Both cinematic versions of the Lew Wallace novel can be analyzed within the context of post-war reactions to cultural conflict and the trauma of war. But the differences in the representation of masculinity and male relationships suggest changes in attitudes precipitated by the particular world war that preceded it.

The First World War was initially perceived by many as "The war to end war." Indeed, *The War That Will End War* was the title of a book H. G. Wells published in 1914 from a series of articles he wrote for the London *Daily News*. As we might say today, it quickly went viral. In the first essay in the volume, titled "Why Britain Went to War," Wells went on to write, "This, the greatest of all wars, is not just another war—it is the last war!" There was, indeed, widespread hope that a new era of lasting peace would follow. By the time Niblo's version of the film premiered in 1925 that hope, a grounding premise of Wilsonian thought, was already fading.[4] Indeed, the film reflects the contradiction inherent in the idea that the road to peace lies in the pursuit of war. In this version Ben-Hur has been maneuvering to raise an army for Christ to lead into battle against Rome and thus bring peace and freedom to Judea. Ben-Hur's encounter with Christ along the Via Dolorosa convinces him to abandon that earthly goal and to drop the literal sword in his hand and follow the way of non-violence (Figure 16.1).

By 1959, however, the Second World War, followed by the Korean War and the seemingly endless and potentially apocalyptic Cold War,

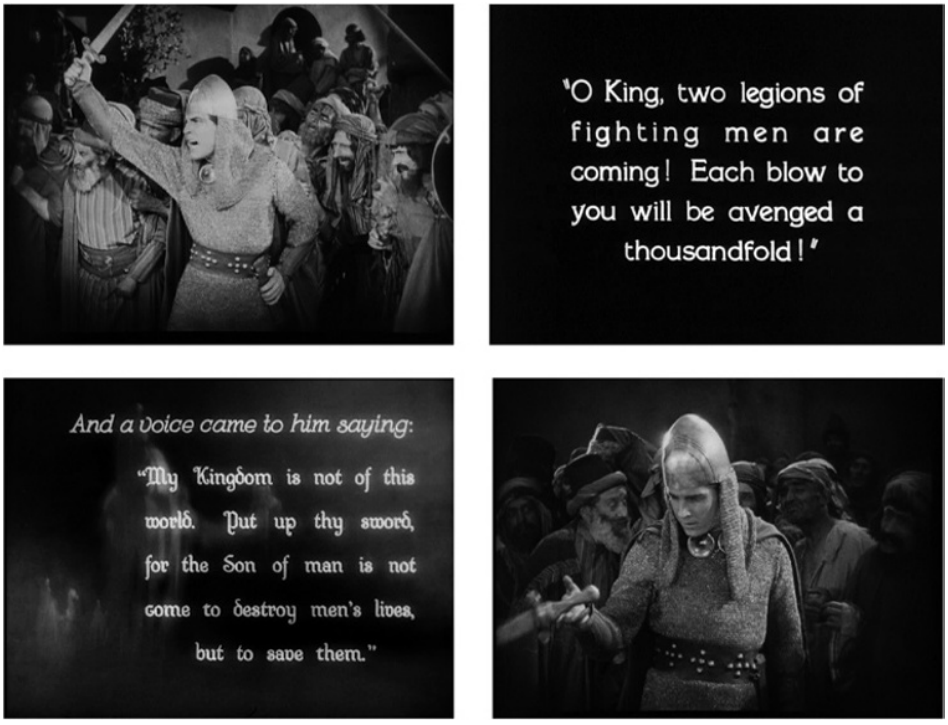

Figure 16.1 Ben-Hur drops the literal sword in his hand to follow the way of non-violence.

categorically put an end to the notion that nations would cease their endless pursuit of earthly conflict or that there could ever be "peace in our time." In Wyler's film, since Ben-Hur has not attempted (or even considered) raising an army for the Messiah, the sword that Ben-Hur must renounce in his encounter with Christ is not the literal sword of battle but the metaphorical sword of personal hatred and the pursuit of vengeance that cuts from within. Four days after the film's world premiere in New York on November 18, 1959, Bosley Crowther clearly articulated this theme and the relevance of the film to post-war audiences, referring specifically to its political echoes of the Second World War and summing up his understanding of its "spiritual" message to a contemporary audience:

> Obviously, this story, with its personal conflicts based on religious and political differences, is more concrete to present generations, which have seen tyrants and persecutors at work, than it could have been to most of the people who read it in the nineteenth century. And it is this paramount realization of the old story's present significance that properly has been foremost in the reckonings of Mr. Wyler and the man (or men) who prepared the script. It is indeed this realization that has justified a remake at this time.
>
> Now, in the hero's conversations with Messala, one can hear echoes of the horrible clash of interests in Nazi Germany. In the burgeoning of hatred in Ben-Hur, one can sense the fierce passion for revenge that must have moved countless tormented people in Poland and Hungary. And in the humble example of Jesus, most tastefully enacted in this film, one can feel a genuine spiritual movement toward the ideal of the brotherhood of man.[5]

It is particularly noteworthy that Crowther articulates the film's message as promoting a "spiritual" movement rather than a political one, and the "ideal" of brotherhood rather than its practical achievement. Earthly peace, it seems, can only be achieved on an individual basis by transcending—or at least averting one's gaze from—earthly trouble and turning inward. The film can thus be seen as expressing a national yearning for an inward turn that the many are afraid is no longer achievable.[6] In that sense, the 1959 film is far less optimistic than the 1925 version and reflects the even deeper alienation and anxiety of the Cold War era.

The attitudinal differences between the two films is reflected in the considerable differences in stylistic approach between the scores for the respective movies. The most striking departures between the two revolve around the inter-related issues of musical exoticism as a marker of Otherness and its relationship to gender. Surprisingly, the 1925 score, composed expressly for the film by the team of William Axt and David Mendoza (incorporating a number of pre-composed elements as well), contains almost no trace of the

kind of pseudo-Middle Eastern music one might expect in a film of this genre at this time, studiously avoiding the use of the Church modes to represent temporal remoteness or the kinds of non-tonal scales or unusual harmonies or harmonic progressions that would sound "exotic" to the contemporary ear, and that would pervade Rózsa's later score. As a composer born and raised in Hungary by parents who introduced him to both classical and Hungarian folk music, Rózsa would have had the "exotic" (i.e., Eastern European) elements in music descending from that heritage as a natural part of his musical language.[7] As I will demonstrate in my analysis of the film's music, Rózsa uses the tools of exoticism both to capture the atmosphere of ancient Rome and the exotic Middle East, as well as to differentiate characters and comment on their various inter-relationships.

Conversely, aside from the extremely rare augmented seconds to denote "Middle Eastern-ness" and thus mainly associated with the Arab horse-trainer, Ilderim, the Axt–Mendoza score seems almost self-consciously to eschew the kind of direct evocation of the exotic nature of the story and visuals that pervades Rózsa's score.[8] That fact is somewhat strange because by 1925 the use of music to represent the exotic, sensuous (if not explicitly sexualized) "Other" already had a long history. Descended from late nineteenth-century, primarily French, operatic conventions for depicting the East, those practices had been made familiar by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatrical traditions, including staged and other musical adaptations of Wallace's novel.[9]

The reasons for this avoidance of the exotic and sensual in the score are not quite clear. One suspects that the subject matter itself with its deeply religious overtones—the film is, after all, "A Tale of the Christ"—prompted a more reverent, or in any case less colorfully exotic approach than might be more easily tolerated—even welcomed—elsewhere.[10] The most striking examples of the tendency of the Axt–Mendoza score to favor sentiment over the sensual are especially apparent in the musical representations of the film's female characters, most overtly in the music for the Egyptian seductress, Iras (whose character does not exist in Wyler's version). In spite of her sumptuous staging and dress (see Figure 16.2), her theme music, played in her interactions with both Messala and Ben-Hur, reminds one of the sort of ubiquitous, insipid parlor music that could easily be used to underscore the ardor of two more chaste cinematic lovers. Although the composers presumably intend the numerous appoggiaturas and suspensions that mark the melody to represent a kind of amorous longing, they come nowhere near the erotic desire one might expect in the wake of Wagnerian chromaticism or the sensual allure of the kind of fake Middle-Eastern music with which they were surely familiar.

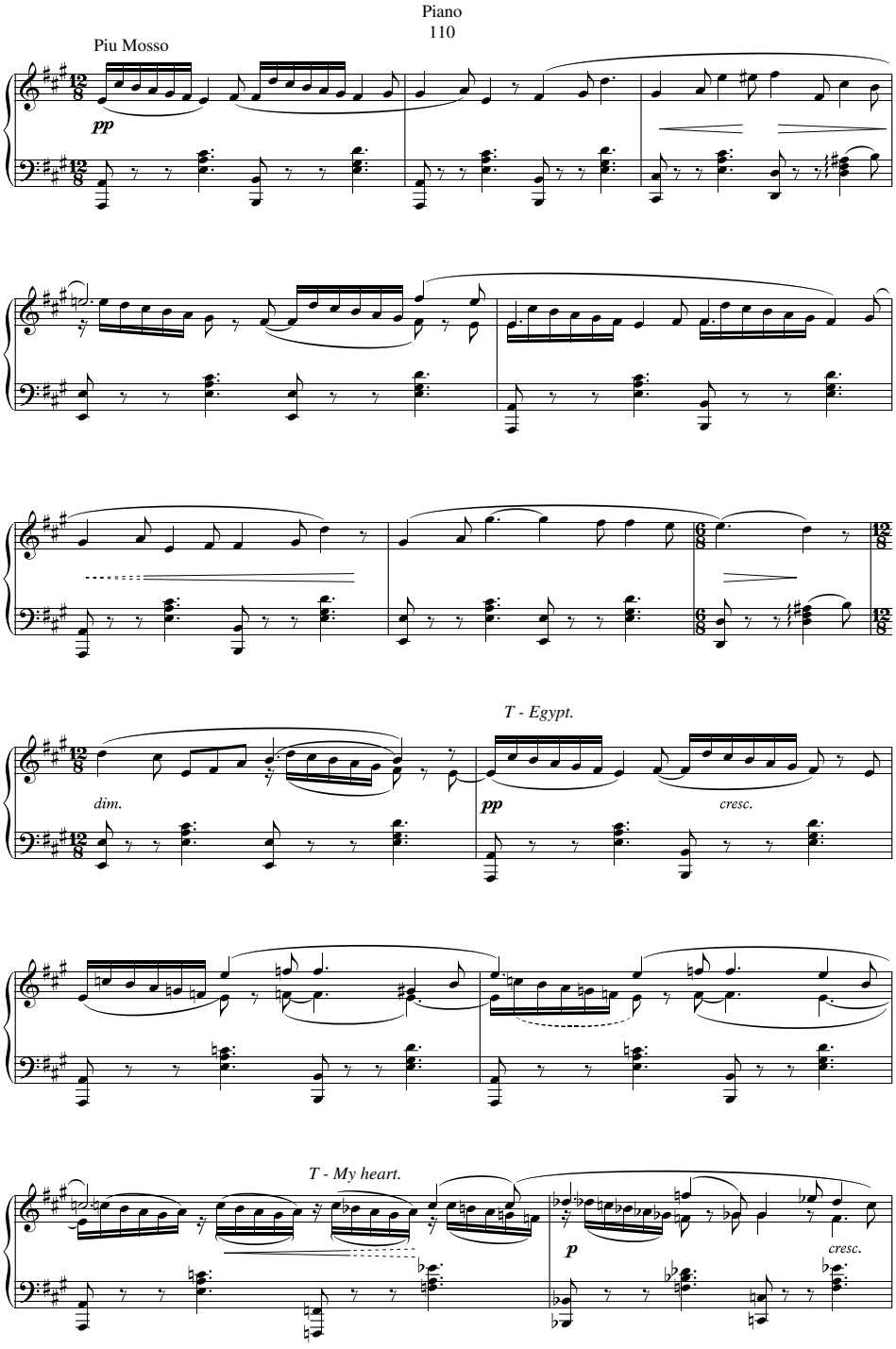

Figure 16.2 Iras.

One might account for this curious approach to scoring Iras as less a representation of her true character than as a sign of her ability to perform innocence and counterfeit passion.[11] In her first appearance with Messala she is posed languidly on a bed, surrounded by slaves, petting a large white peacock, with a feathered headdress in her silky black hair. Soon after, though, in her scene with Ben-Hur, and underscored by the very same music, she has donned a fake, highly crimped and platinum blonde, but seemingly more chaste wig (in spite of the prominent silver lizard adorning its right side), and commences her coy seduction. That blonde wig is important because it engages, even if only subconsciously, a comparison with the pure and demure Esther—the proper focus of Ben-Hur's amorous attentions. Indeed, Niblo's Esther is the epitome of 1920s Anglo-American (read White) girlish virginity with her shy demeanor, cascading blonde curls and pet white dove (as opposed to the over-the-top peacock of Iras). Indeed, she is virtually—and most likely intentionally—indistinguishable in look and deportment from Betty Bronson's Virgin Mary who appears at the beginning of the film (see Figure 16.3). With its bird-like flutterings and simple but earnest melody representing her quiet submissivness and unalduterated purity (symbolized by her pet white dove), Esther's music has even less of passion in it than that of Iras.

In contrast to the ubiquitous, overt "whiteness" that pervades the film, especially in regard to its female characters, Wyler's choice of Israeli actress Haya Harareet to play Esther in the 1959 film seems to make at least a nod to "authenticity" in casting and invites a rather different interpretation of her character both narratively and musically. In the first instance, the casting of Harareet seems to have posed something of a conundrum for the film-makers. Indeed a 1959 *New York Times* journalist framed it (Hudgins 1959), not overtly (though not terribly unsubtly, either), as the Virgin/Whore dichotomy. A lengthy portion of the passage deserves repeating here:

> The film capital greeted a new kind of glamour girl from overseas just the other day when Haya Harareet, unknown a year ago, arrived to fulfill the contract she signed with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer after playing the top feminine role in "Ben-Hur." Miss Harareet [...] is young (early 20's), beautiful (dark-haired, brown-eyed), shapely and loaded with that commodity, apparently a must for foreign actresses, known as sex appeal. What makes this young newcomer unusual is that neither she nor MGM intends to capitalize on these obviously salable attributes.
>
> As part of its campaign to introduce her to moviegoers, the studio said it will concentrate on her talent as an actress. There will be no cheesecake photographs,

Mary (Betty Bronson)

Esther (May McAvoy)

Figure 16.3 Mary and Esther.

no interviews in which she compares the American male to his Latin counterpart, no effort to link her romantically with eligible bachelors. One studio official put it this way: "She'll get the same type of high-class build-up that helped make Ingrid Bergman and Grace Kelly important stars."

The fact that in "Ben-Hur" she portrays the almost saintly Esther, who remains faithful to her sweetheart during his five-year absence, had nothing to do, it is stated, with the *unusual* approach M-G-M has decided upon to publicize the actress.

Referring to Harareet's required stint in the Israeli military, Gloria Emerson (1959), writing a day before the much anticipated New York premiere, focused on her more "obviously salable attributes" by comparing her to one of the Old Testament's most notorious seductresses:

> A young woman who can pitch a grenade, plow a field, drive a truck and look as beautiful as Bathsheba is in New York to find out whether she will be the first Israeli actress to impress American moviegoers.

In Wyler's film this tension between sex and saintliness in the character of Esther is more subtly drawn as a narrative pull between Esther's erotic attraction to Ben-Hur as opposed to her spiritual attraction to Christ and her attempt to reconcile them by helping lead the one to the other.[12] Rózsa intuitively sublimates this tension in his theme music for Esther by subtly aligning it with the music he wrote to represent "Judea."

As opposed to the brassy militaristic marches animated by insistent dotted rhythms with modally inflected melodies representing the might of Imperial Rome (the Phrygian mode, for example, harmonized with open fourths and fifths to accompany the entrance of Gratus into Jerusalem), Rózsa underscores Judea's vulnerability to domination by Rome with a more feminine, lyrical theme, also modally inflected but in the gentler Dorian mode that suggests not only submission to tyrannical rule but a certain exotic sensuousness (see Figure 16.4).[13] Affectively similar to the lyrical, feminine qualities of the "Judea" music, Esther's theme also incorporates the prominent characteristic melodic turn of the former.

More subtly, in addition to the melodic and affective similarities between the two themes, they are also united by a particular aspect of the relationship between the Dorian mode and the Mixolydian mode. Although a cursory glance at the score of the music for the first scene between Esther and Ben-Hur alone suggests the mode for Esther's music is C Aeolian (more commonly known today as natural minor), the first half of the melody studiously avoids the sixth scale degree, making the actual mode ambiguous until the introduction of the A-flat in bar 12. As the second, sequential half of the theme begins, moving down through an E-flat major triad, the melodic turn, encompassing both the flat seventh and the raised sixth, pulls the music into the Mixolydian mode, the only other mode that shares with Dorian the raised-sixth/flat-seventh characteristic of the "Judea" music.[14] This is undoubtedly a "Love Theme," but its gentle modal exoticism along with other links to the music representing the victimized "Judea" allows it to function as something more than that (see Figure 16.5). Across the film, Esther's theme tends to transcend the representation of love as simply an

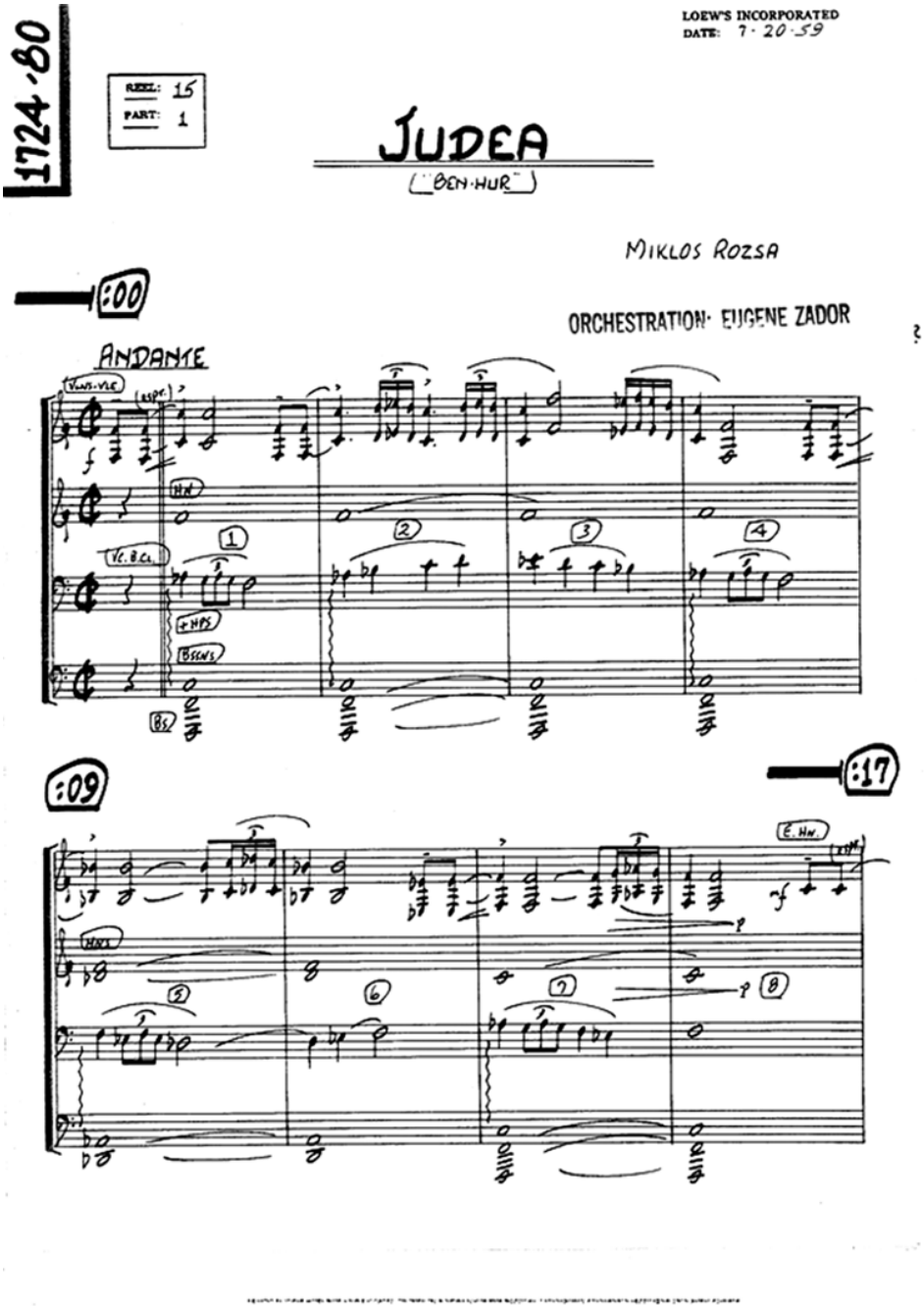

Figure 16.4 The "Judea" motif

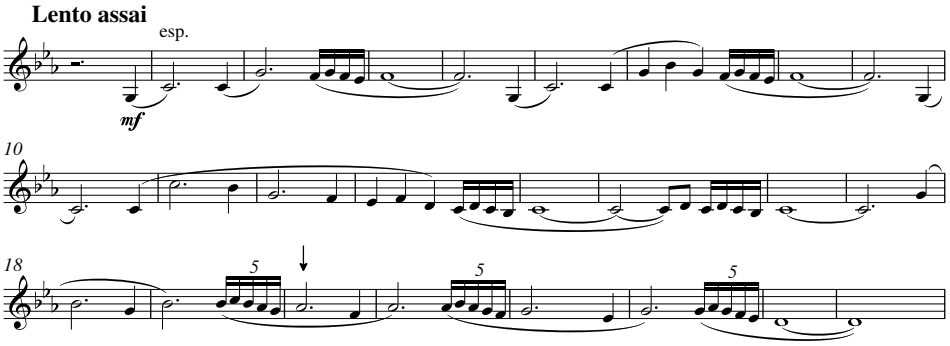

Figure 16.5 Esther's motif.

erotic attraction. Its alignment with the "Judea" music, along with Esther's role as a mediating figure between Christ and Ben-Hur, allows it to evoke a sense of a variety of higher loves: a love rooted in place and nation; a love embedded, as at the very end of the film, in the larger context of familial healing and unity; and a spiritual love that transcends earthly strife, arising out of mercy and forgiveness.[15]

The divergent nature of the motifs for Esther represents only one of the numerous, striking differences in the cinematic and specifically musical depiction between Niblo's and Wyler's films. While we might plausibly attribute certain of these divergences to differences in the compositional imagination and craft of the two scores, the stylistic, musical choices in themselves point to significant social transformations between the post-First World War era and the late post-war period following the Second World War. These changes are not just indicative of evolving notions of gender as well as depictions of antiquity and the exotic realms they inevitably invoke. More subtly, perhaps, these musical, narrative and visual contrasts point to the various ways in which Lew Wallace's original story can be read and reread across the cultural upheaval of the twentieth century as notions of the individual subject shift and change. In what follows, I will be particularly concerned in the later film with how these shifts impinge on the musical representation of Ben-Hur's role as a male subject in terms of his multiple personal relationships and interactions. Even more fascinating is how Rózsa is compelled to illustrate the somewhat fractured nature of Ben-Hur's multiple identifications—Jew, Roman citizen, "Romanized" repatriated Jew, and, finally, Christian—in order to restore him to wholeness through the parallel musical narrative he composes.

Not surprisingly, the musical terms through which Rózsa initially depicts this split in identifications pit the muscular might of Rome against the submissive, feminine sensuousness of "Judea." By doing so, Rózsa unwittingly,

yet perfectly, illustrates Edward Said's contention that the relationship of Occident and Orient is fundamentally a relation of power.[16] Furthermore, as Said argues, that relationship often has a clearly gendered aspect.[17] To a lesser degree, that gendered aspect is played out in the contrast between the themes for Esther and Ben-Hur. What is not so immediately obvious, however, is how tactically Rózsa deploys musical exoticism in relation to masculinity in *Ben-Hur*. In fact, Rózsa faced a particularly complex task in deciding how to score the man Ben-Hur, especially in light of the way he runs the gamut of positions from abject powerlessness to absolute power and in his subjective identifications, particularly in his relationship with Messala.

Naturally, Rózsa began by assigning to Judah Ben-Hur the most immediately recognizable and important motif in the film. Like much of the other music in the film, it has a simple, straightforward quality, making its presence throughout the film clearly and immediately felt (see Figure 16.6). Westcott has described this motif as being like the character of Ben-Hur himself:

> inherently confident [it nevertheless] must undergo the many trials and changes forced upon it by the demands of the drama. Through the use of varied accompaniments, textures, orchestrations, tempi, etc., Rózsa is able to describe the many emotional responses and dramatic confrontations that define the character, ranging from a certain pensive helplessness to an almost swashbuckling optimism.[18]

This swashbuckling element is apparent at its first appearance in the film's credits, though as yet the audience has no idea that it is connected directly to the character of Ben-Hur.

In his recent monograph on the music for the 1959 film, Roger Hickman has commented on the difference in the depiction of Heston's Ben-Hur from his predecessors' and noted the more pronounced masculinity of the film's eponymous hero.

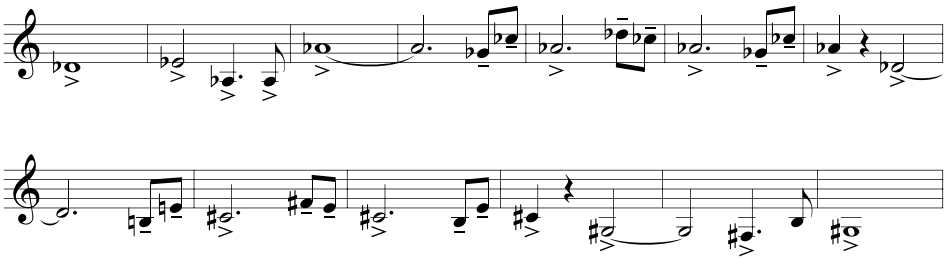

Figure 16.6 Ben-Hur's motif.

> Ben-Hur's character is given greater masculine strength and a higher level of vulnerability in the film. His strength is built through the trials of fire (the burning desert march), water (surviving a shipwreck), and wind (the chariot race), but his victories have no value without his family, the source of his vulnerability. These two sides of his character are established early in the film. The accident with the roof tile is shown to be the fault of Tirzah, not Ben-Hur. With this change, the film retains Judah's image of athleticism (not prone to clumsy accidents) and projects his protectiveness of the family when he takes the blame. These qualities come into further prominence in the following scene, which was newly created for the film. Ben-Hur is shown in the prison at the Antonio Fortress. With physical bravura, he escapes form the guards and confronts Messala. Holding a threatening javelin in hand, Ben-Hur can have quick revenge. But Messala exploits his vulnerability—his concern and love for his mother and sister; Judah throws the spear into the wall and is taken to be a galley slave.[19]

Later, Hickman describes Ben-Hur's motif as "virile and active."[20] This element of the heroic male in the music for Heston's character stands in stark contrast to that for Ramon Novarro's Ben-Hur. At his first appearance in the earlier film (and through the film thereafter), Novarro's Ben-Hur is accompanied by an almost dirge-like piece in F-minor characterized by a melodic line with sighing chromatic lower neighbors, giving his music a distinct undertone of melancholy and longing (see Figure 16.7). His music hardly ever approaches a hint of the "masculine" qualities of the music for Heston.[21]

Turning back to Heston's Judah, as the only character in the film able to straddle and negotiate both the Roman and Judean worlds, in the1959 film Ben-Hur's motif shares elements of the music used to characterize the two opposing worlds, illustrating his ability to fuse the two. The theme's head motive, with its opening major second ascent and then descent of a perfect fifth followed by the "heroic" leap of an octave, easily succumbs to "Romanization."[22] The Romanization of Ben-Hur's motif can most readily be heard in the music preceding the chariot race, where Judah's motif becomes embedded in the middle of the Roman marches and is even played in a diegetic version by the Roman trumpeters. And yet, in other musical settings its melodic continuation sometimes recalls the modal, lyrical character of the "Love Theme" always associated with Esther.[23] The remarkable adaptability of Ben-Hur's motif thus helps musically define him as a masculine subject with a unique, all-encompassing perspective.

But if this sort of musical depiction of the masculine subject seems straightforward within the context of the 1950s, things become more complex as Ben-Hur engages with the other men in the film—most immediately when his boyhood friend Messala, now Rome's tribune in Judea, returns. Before I

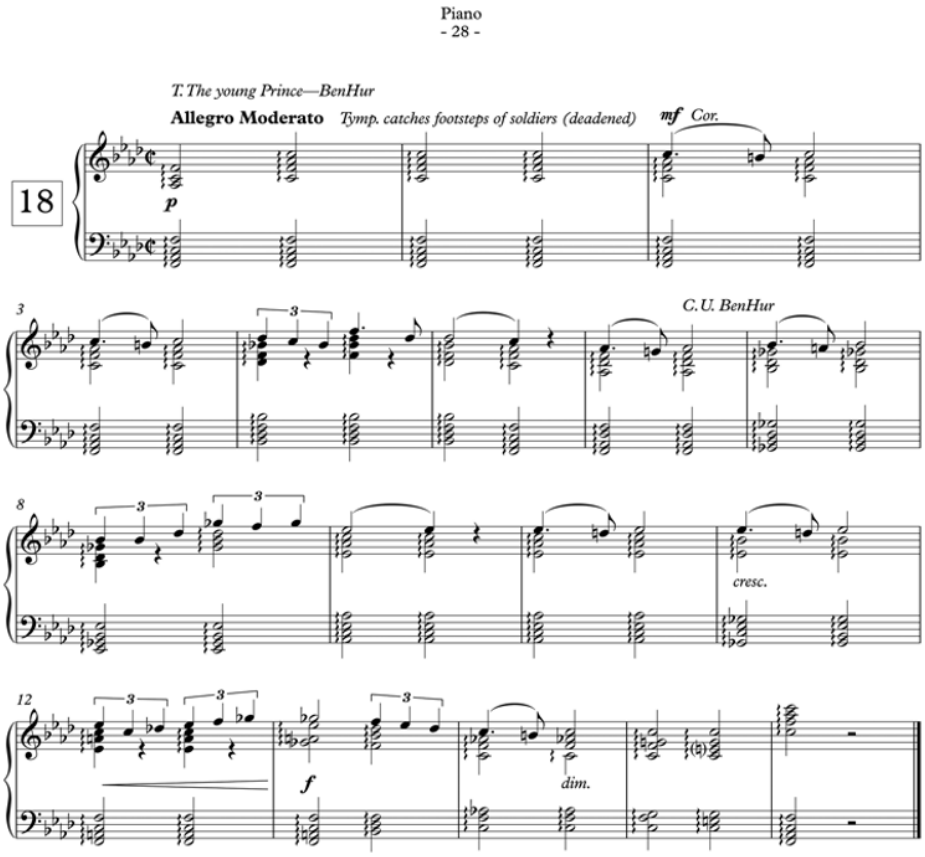

Figure 16.7 Ben-Hur's motif from the 1925 film.

delve into the musical depiction of that relationship, it would be productive to compare the visual representations of Ben-Hur and Messala in the two films (see Figure 16.8). If Heston represents the square-jawed ideal of mid-century masculinity, Novarro, like his contemporary Rudolf Valentino (originally rumored to have been chosen to play Niblo's Ben-Hur), is clearly a matinee idol who projects a strong erotic appeal to the throngs of movie-going women reading the immensely popular movie magazines of the 1920s.[24]

In Lew Wallace's novel Ben-Hur is depicted as a young man in his late teens, just out of adolescence.[25] Fred Niblo's choice of Novarro to play the lead character comes much closer to this characterization than Wyler's. Figure 16.9—a painting of Novarro from the April, 1925 edition of *Motion Picture Magazine*, based on his scenes of servitude on board Arrius's warship

Figure 16.8 A comparison of the visual depictions of Ben-Hur in the 1925 and 1959 versions of the film.

in the film, emphasizes his youthful, vulnerable—and erotic—qualities by depicting him as a boyish, lithe, nude galley slave.

In Fred Niblo's 1925 version of the film Messala, Ben-Hur's boyhood friend, is played by the beefy bodybuilder Francis X. Bushman. The difference in the visual representation between the two Messalas is less marked than that between the two portrayals of Ben Hur. But in the 1959 film Stephen Boyd—with "his friendly Irish face" (Scheuer 1959)—was, like Novarro (and certainly unlike Bushman) an up-and-coming matinee idol in his own right. In an early encounter with Boyd (well before the release of *Ben-Hur*) Hollywood gossip maven, Hedda Hopper (1958), pigeonholed him in just that category:

> When I met Boyd in Rome last summer I fell hard, and immediately felt he would become a great figure in our industry. At that time I wrote in my column: "Mark my words, Boyd will be our next matinee idol. He's 30, has a wonderful face and a wit to go with it."[26]

Immediately after the premiere of the film in New York on November 18, 1959, Jack Gaver (1959) exclaimed, "Stephen Boyd's Messala is bound to put him in the first rank of stars as a new personality appealing both to women and men." One supposes that the underlying appeal to women Gaven refers to was essentially erotic. Nowhere is this erotic appeal more

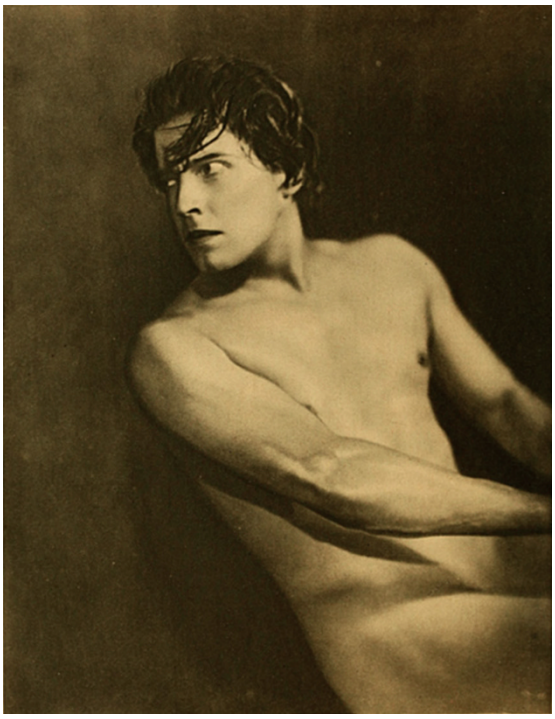

Figure 16.9 Painting of Ramon Novarro as Ben-Hur, a galley slave.

evident than in the scene at the Roman baths (with its implicitly erotic *and* homoerotic potential—certainly not what Gaver meant in what he called the appeal "both to women and men"!) in which Boyd was obliged to appear semi-nude and well-oiled for good measure (Figure 16.10). In this regard, Boyd's Messala assumes the more effeminate—even erotic—qualities associated with Ramon Novarro and his depiction of Ben-Hur.

Interestingly, neither of the Messalas, unlike many of the other main characters, has a motif of his own. In the 1959 version, however, unlike composers Mendoza and Axt for Niblo's earlier film, Rózsa did compose music to represent the relationship between Judah Ben-Hur and his boyhood friend. This music first appears early in the film, in the entry hall to the Roman fortress when the two men are reunited after many years apart. In composing the "Friendship" cue that accompanies this scene, Rózsa had to confront the problem of how to represent musically the powerful bond of friendship between the two men and the joy of their reunion by creating a musical

(a)

(b)

Figure 16.10 (a), (b) The Roman baths.

motif that would also be able to serve later in modified form as a marker of their hatred for one another. That Rózsa was able to compose a theme that could represent two powerful yet diametrically opposed emotional relationships is a testament to his musical ingenuity.

To make this intramasculine relationship even more complex, from the testimony of some of those involved (including Charlton Heston himself and Gore Vidal, who worked on the script and this scene in particular), there is a pointed homoerotic, if not homosexual, subtext to this scene. Vidal went so far as to suggest to Stephen Boyd, the actor who portrays Messala, that he should play this scene as if Messala wanted to resume the sexual relationship he enjoyed with Judah in their youth.[27] Obviously, this is not something that could have been explicitly invoked in the late 1950s within the narrative itself. But, as Susan Tuszynski (2006: 116) has pointed out, even taken at face value the relationship between the Jew Ben-Hur and the Roman Messala is essentially unnatural and ultimately irreconcilable. Rózsa's task in the scene was to represent both the strong feelings of joy at the reunion with music that was

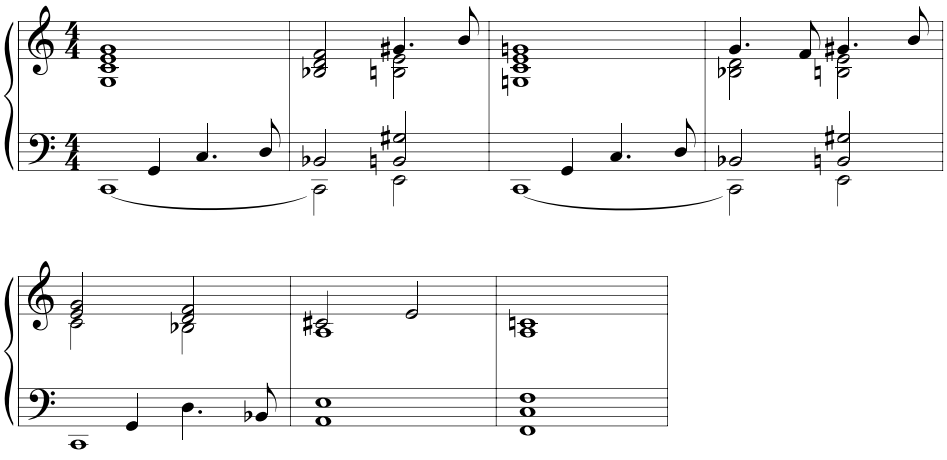

Figure 16.11 "Friendship" motif.

inherently ambiguous enough to later represent a complete transformation in the intersubjective relationship between the two men. Rózsa accomplished this task by writing a theme that was inherently exotic, combining elements of both the "Roman" music with other elements stereotypically associated with the Middle East (Figure 16.11). The "Roman" element is particularly evident in the dotted rhythms that pervade both the melody and the accompaniment throughout the first five measures of the seven-measure long motif.

The melody itself, however, with its augmented seconds and tritone ambit, gives the motif both a tonally ambiguous quality and a conspicuously exotic flavor. That sense of the exotic becomes even stronger as the motif progresses and the melody can be seen to unfold as the upper tetrachords of two harmonic minor scales separated by a whole tone. The use of the harmonic minor tetrachord as a marker for the "Middle Eastern Exotic" already had a long history in Western music (the Bacchanale from Saint Saens' *Samson and Delilah* is a particularly clear example). The tonal vagueness inherent in this tetrachord is emphasized further in Rózsa's setting in which each note is harmonized as the fifth of a major triad, creating an unstable field of chromatic third relationships (Figure 16.12). The continual sequential unfolding of the motive throughout the scene only adds to the sense of ambiguity, restlessness and lack of resolution. Rózsa's transformation of the motif from one of joyful reunion to conflict and hatred later in the film is often deceptively simple: he replaces the major triads with minor triads. But since the motif is not tonal, the melody itself requires no adjustments. Indeed, the change to minor triads reveals more directly the "unnatural," darker implications of the exotic, harmonic minor tetrachords out of which the motif is constructed.

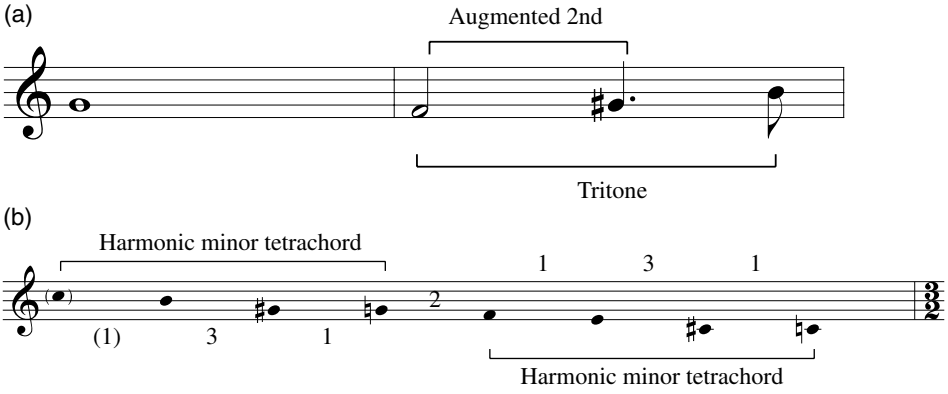

Figure 16.12 (a), (b) musical elements of the "Friendship" motif.

While the "Friendship" motif evolves to represent the changing nature of the intersubjective relationship between the two men, there is no narrative or musical resolution to that relationship at Messala's death. In fact, the "Friendship" motif haunts Ben-Hur until almost the end of the film, as it continues to provide a window into Judah's feelings of hatred and vengeance resulting from Messala's betrayal of their original homoerotic bond and the destruction of Judah's family. Indeed, it is only through another male intersubjective relationship that the narrative attains resolution and Ben-Hur as masculine subject is made whole again. That resolution and transformation depend on the redemptive interlocutions of the Christ figure and, because of the strategies the film-makers decided to employ for representing Christ, those interlocutions can *only* be understood in terms of the film's music.

These questions of unstable homosocial relationships and their resolution as part of a musical drama are wholly absent in the 1925 version of story. Messala has no music and there is no specific music to mark his relationship with Judah Ben-Hur. After the chariot race and his death, Messala disappears as a motivating narrative force for Ben-Hur or as a musical presence more generally. More importantly, the music for Christ in Niblo's film has a traditional, hymn-like and earthbound quality to it (Figure 16.13), as opposed to the more ethereal and transcendent music for the later film, as I will explain in more detail below.

Rózsa's music for Christ presents a dramatic contrast to the music in the earlier film. Although the two films both underpin Christ with a kind of homophonic simplicity, Rózsa's music underpins the chords with luminous orchestrations to help limn the Divine nature of Christ: a figure of peace and serenity; a man set apart from the concerns and ideologies of a world in conflict. In a sense, this music embodies an American post-war version of Christ that

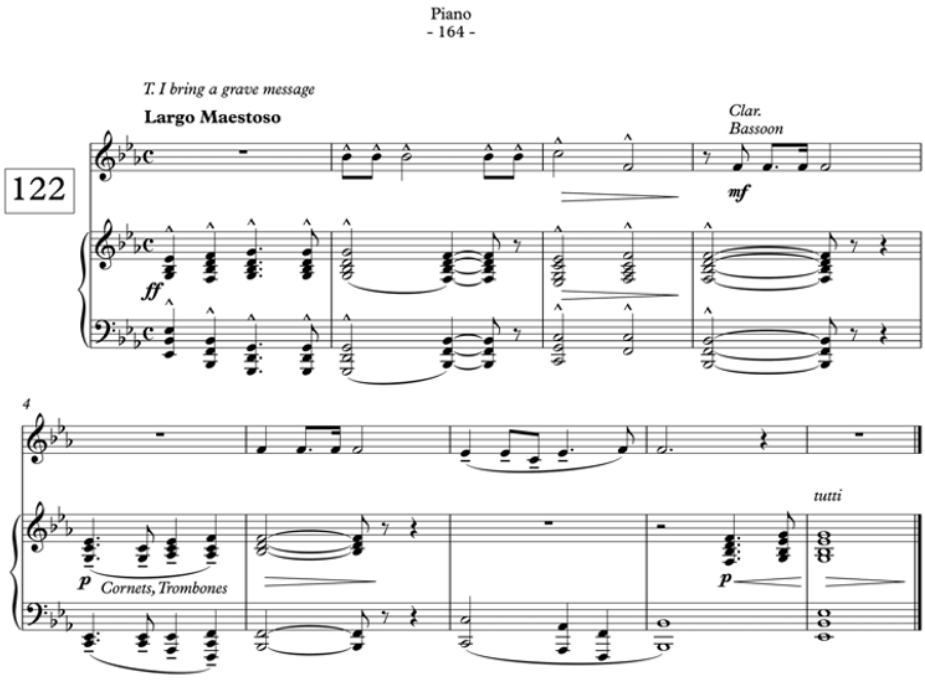

Figure 16.13 "Christ" Motif (1925).

symbolizes the inward escape from a world of continual conflict and strife alluded to at the beginning of this essay. It hardly seems accidental, then, that Christ's musical cues are titled "Prince of Peace." The sense of remove from worldly concerns that Wyler's Christ epitomizes is reflected in the character of the music Rózsa composed for Him, which diverges so notably from the rest of the score.[28] Predominantly major chords, related by chromatic mediants, allow only an occasional, modally inflected minor triad to slightly color the musical glow. Rózsa interjects within the serene flow of triads a descending figure marked, unlike any of the other motifs in the film, by a prominent Lydian fourth that imparts a magical, transcendent quality to His music (a figure which, henceforth, I will call "Saving Grace") (see Figure 16.14). Rózsa uses these special qualities to stand in for the power of the face of Christ, of the gaze we never see except in the reflected gazes of those within the film who look upon Him and recognize His authority. In the first encounter between Ben-Hur and Christ during the desert march to the galley, Rózsa seizes the opportunity to illustrate musically the intimate relationship forged between the two men in this moment of desperate need and compassionate fulfillment when, looking up into the face we cannot see, Ben-Hur receives the life-saving water from His hand. As the scene progresses and Ben-Hur

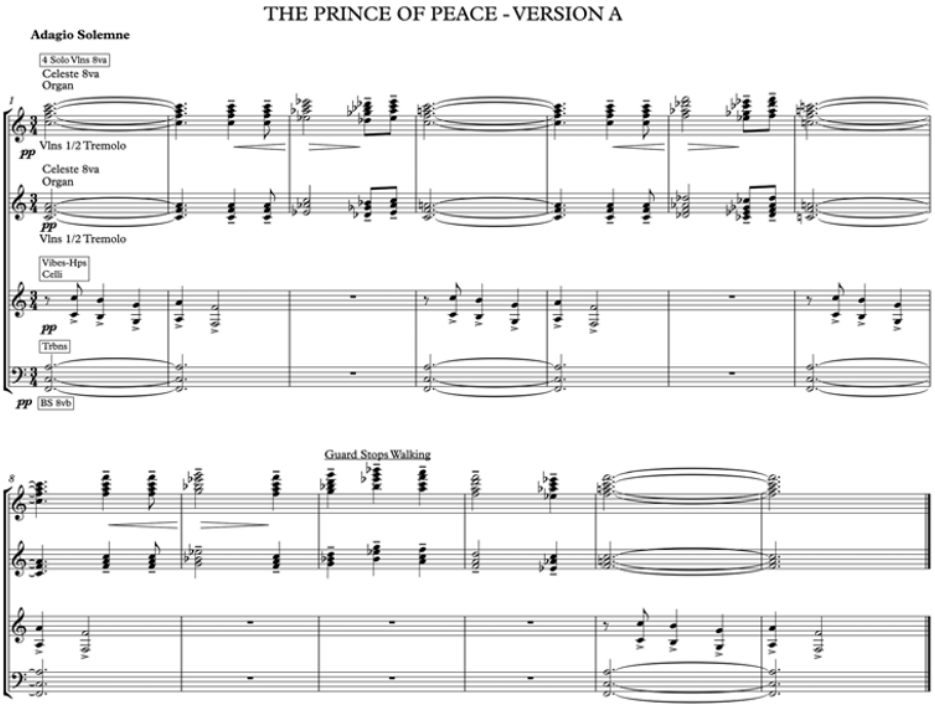

Figure 16.14 "Prince of Peace" motif (1959).

revives and the march resumes, Rózsa cements the newly forged relationship between the two men by superimposing Christ's transcendent "Saving Grace" motif over Ben-Hur's newly refreshed theme. Unfortunately, in the recording of the orchestral version chosen for the scene (of which Rózsa composed at least three), the Christ motif, played on glockenspiel and celesta, is barely audible. A careful listener can just discern it, but most will hear it only as a bit of color over the more prominent strings playing Judah's music.

Though one might at first relate the chromatically inflected third relationships in the Christ motif to the "Friendship" motif, unlike that motif with its restless, modulatory tendencies, the Christ motif tends to continually gravitate back to a foundational "tonic" chord, giving the music a sense of being firmly grounded. Although at its first appearance the Christ music may seem conventional in its function, as the film progresses it becomes a continually rupturing element in the narrative and musical fabric of the film. This sense of rupture is partly an effect of the choice the film-makers made never to allow the face or voice of Christ to be represented to the film's audience, creating a sense of desire that remains unfulfilled. That sense of musical and narrative rupture is most evident in the pivotal Sermon on the Mount scene.

The Sermon on the Mount scene follows directly after Ben-Hur's emotionally wrenching visit to the Valley of the Lepers in which he discovers that his mother and sister (Miriam and Tirzah) are both still alive but fatally afflicted. His inability to interact with them, or even reveal his presence, forcefully resurrects his hate for the now dead Messala. The scene shifts from the Valley of the Lepers to the Sermon as Ben-Hur and Esther, leaving the Valley, stop next to a brook and watch as a crowd gathers on a hillside. Rózsa covers this cut with the Lydian-inflected "Saving Grace" figure. Along with the visuals, this cue and the music that follows it are ripe with intended meanings. On the most obvious level, Rózsa intends the motif to signal the imminent reappearance of Jesus within the narrative. But one can also hear it as an immediate counterbalance to the storm of emotions stirred up within Ben-Hur: a call to remember mercy and forego hate. The brook itself symbolizes the freely flowing mercy of Christ we first witnessed when He gave the life-saving water to the thirsting slave, Ben-Hur, in his moment of desperate need. With the brook, Wyler also foreshadows the torrent of water unleashed at the Crucifixion, colored with the saving blood of Christ, at the end of the film. As Ben-Hur and Esther continue walking beside the stream, however, the "Saving Grace" motif becomes suddenly corrupted by a dark twist into the minor mode. If this moment is not a musical representation of Ben-Hur's outright rejection of Christ and his message, at the very least it reflects his conflicted emotional and spiritual state at this moment toward His message (if not His person) and injects a sense of ambiguity into Ben-Hur's attitude toward the call to reject hatred.

Suddenly, the scene shifts to a long shot of Christ, the figure in white at the top of the hill, and the crowd thronging toward him, and just as suddenly the "Saving Grace" motif returns to major. As the motif unfolds, the shot switches back to a close up of the trio by the brook and the bewildered, questioning face of Ben-Hur that turns first to Esther and then back to the figure on the hill. The motif appears at this moment both as a general call to the crowd and a specific one to Ben-Hur to come to Him. Though Esther moves forward in response to this call, Ben-Hur remains rooted and immobile. Balthasar then enters the scene as his pastoral, hymn-like music begins, and he tells Ben-Hur that he has found the Man he has been seeking since His birth in Bethlehem: the Son of God. Ben-Hur averts his gaze at these words. His resistance to Christ's pull becomes overt when in response to Balthasar's words he crouches beside the brook. Exchanging glances with Ben-Hur, Esther leaves to join the growing throng. Ben-Hur drinks from the brook. Balthasar entreats Ben-Hur to "Come, come with me." Ben-Hur responds by narrating his encounter of the march to the galley when thirst had nearly killed him. At his words, "a man gave me water to drink. I went

on living," Rózsa reiterates the music, "Saving Grace," but as the motif continues Ben-Hur, flinging the remaining drops of water from his hand, bitterly declares, "I should have done better if I had poured it into the sand. I am thirsty still." Balthasar makes one last entreaty, but Ben-Hur is firm in his rejection and declares that he has business with Rome.

But Ben-Hur's encounter with Christ in this scene is not yet finished, for the filmmakers further dramatize the rupturing effect of Christ's presence on the diegesis and the narrative rupture between the two men. Though we as the audience cannot hear His words, we watch the diegetic audience within the film drinking in His words with rapt attention. In this instance, Christ's non-diegetic music both stands in for and yet masks His voice; "miraculously" His music both inhabits and yet transcends the diegesis, a metaphor perhaps for His double nature as both God and Man, the bridge between the natural and the supernatural.

Because of this unique relationship to music, unlike any other character in the film, our sense of the subjective presence of Christ and his intersubjective relationship with Ben-Hur (or any of the other characters, for that matter) has been, and can only be, portrayed musically. And that intersection of music and intersubjectivity becomes crucial to our understanding of the film's narrative resolution in which Ben-Hur finally accepts emotional and spiritual redemption. The sense of the music for this scene as both standing in for and yet masking the words of Jesus is confirmed by the manuscript short score. Beneath the chords in the low strings that dominate the cue appear the words of only two of the eight Beatitudes: number five blessing the merciful and number seven the peacemakers; those who put aside conflict (#7) and those who embrace forgiveness (#5). In other words, the two qualities of which Ben-Hur is most in need.

5. Blessed are the merciful,
   for they shall obtain mercy.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers,
   for they shall be called children of God.[29]

The triplet figures, which are new to this version of the music, are a direct result of the musical declamation the verses would require if they were to be actually sung (Figure 16.15).

Crucially, the "Saving Grace" motif, symbolizing the special relationship between Christ and Ben-Hur, disappears from this iteration of Christ's music for the end of the scene. If the unheard words of the music are directed toward Judah, the fact that he does not or cannot hear them is illustrated by the musical rupture that has occurred. The music which first symbolized their connection has finally disappeared and the distance now separating the two men is visually symbolized in the scene by the physical distance between them

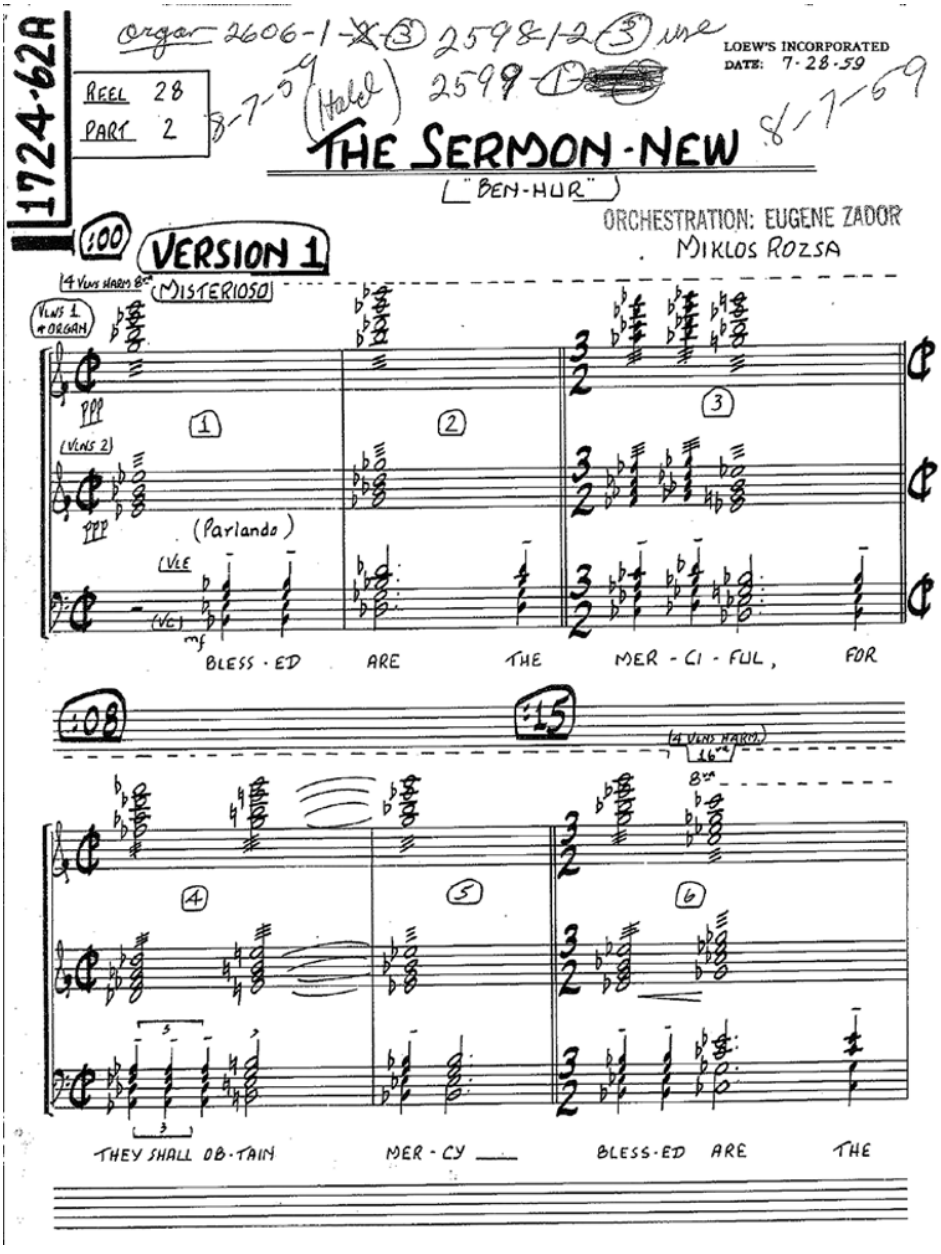

Figure 16.15 "The Sermon."

captured in the *mise-en-scène*. In a long shot with the seated crowd in the foreground and Esther moving up the hill in the middle-ground, we can discern a tiny red figure striding across the background. Switching suddenly to a reverse shot, Ben-Hur now appears in the foreground (from behind) and Christ is set

as the tiny figure on his left at the top of the hill. He stops one last time to survey the scene and ponder the Man in white. As he stands watching, immobilized once again, the scene shifts to a counter-shot from the top of the hill with Ben-Hur again almost indistinguishable in the background. As Christ presumably addresses the crowd, the music for the Sermon begins and the diminutive and emotionally diminished figure again strides purposefully across the background, away from Christ and His "words" and out of the scene.

The musical pathway that Ben-Hur will follow from this scene of bitterness and denial and toward his ultimate emotional and spiritual healing will begin, appropriately enough, along the Via Dolorosa. The scene in which Ben-Hur had first encountered Christ and received the saving water becomes both dramatically and visually mirrored here. As Ben-Hur witnesses His horrible slog toward Golgotha, Christ stumbles and falls. Ben-Hur, stricken with pity and anger, grabs a ladle of water and, pushing through the crowd gives it to Him. As their eyes meet, we understand that Ben-Hur suddenly recognizes the Man who is now receiving what was first given to him and at that moment the "Saving Grace" motif enters once again (though the cue is brutally cut short by the guard's kick before the music can reach its tonic chord). This moment of recognition and interruption becomes the catalyst for Ben-Hur's subsequent appearance at the Crucifixion. And it is here in this scene that we witness how Rózsa reweaves the key musical strands of the film's musical fabric in which Ben-Hur has been entangled and thereby resolves in the dénouement the conflicts stemming from the intersecting masculine relationships between Ben-Hur, Messala and Christ. While on the surface the film's narrative posits this moment as the redemption of mankind (Jesus taking the sin of the world upon Himself), Rózsa's music creates a subtext with a more personal significance for Ben-Hur. By underscoring the crucifixion scene with only four motifs—"Revenge," "Friendship," "Prince of Peace" and "Ben-Hur"—Rózsa reveals the true import of this scene within the film as the sorting out of the intersubjective relations between Ben-Hur, Messala and Christ, as well as Ben-Hur's redemption from the traumatic ramifications of Messala's impact on his life. In order for Ben-Hur to be made whole again as the film's heroic male subject, the ongoing, corrosive presence of Messala (which, since his death, has been explicitly projected only within the underscore) must finally be erased. As Ben-Hur relates to Esther soon after Christ's death, that redemption—his ability finally to forgive Messala—comes when Christ utters the words, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." In that moment, Judah tells Esther, "I felt His voice take the sword out of my hand." And while that redemptive voice is withheld from us, the audience (as it has been consistently throughout the film), it is still possible, as in the Sermon on the Mount scene, to hear the

trace of that voice in the final moments of the scene. With Ben-Hur's teary gaze fixed on the cross, we hear his motif in minor give way to the numinous Christ music as his face moves slightly, yet significantly, into the light of redemption (Figure 16.16).

Thus, the music for Christ does not simply underscore an element of the drama. As a literal stand-in for the diegetic, efficacious voice, and bodily, yet still numinous presence of God, it straddles and transcends diegetic boundaries. When Ben-Hur returns home and narrates for Esther the redemptive effects of Christ's words, the Christ music, in its most intimate incarnation for chamber strings, plays beneath, becoming a metaphor for Judah's internalization of a perfect and literally supra-human masculinity. Music in this moment, therefore, functions not as a marker of an excess of emotion, as in the

Figure 16.16 Ben-Hur, from darkness to light.

conventional melodrama, but rather illuminates an intersubjective, narrative transformation: a transformation that was itself portrayed musically rather than through the narrative directly. At the moment Ben-Hur internalizes this music, he is both restored as a fully masculine subject and yet, at the same time, finally separated from masculine interrelationships in the film. As Judah relates the change within himself when he says, "And I felt His voice take the sword from my hands," the "Love Theme" begins followed by "Mother's Love." It is thus at the moment of the narrative and musical resolution of his challenged male subject position throughout the film that Ben-Hur can reenter the domestic realm with his mother, sister and future wife in a narrative and musical setting where emotion and patriarchy (as expressed through the musical resolutions of male representation) can coexist without challenging masculinity.

As I discussed earlier, in the 1925 version of the film Ben-Hur initially sees Christ as the conquering king who will free the land of Judea from the oppression of Rome. The turning point for Ben-Hur in that film comes when he hears a voice while watching the procession along the Via Dolorosa. In the earlier film Ben-Hur is redeemed through enlightenment when he realizes that he has misinterpreted Christ's mission on Earth. Unlike Heston's Ben-Hur, Novarro's has a less intimate relationship to Christ: in contrast to Heston, he does not intervene in the procession to Calvary by taking the cross on himself and has no presence at the scene of crucifixion.

In William Wyler's 1959 blockbuster, however, Ben-Hur achieves spiritual redemption and emotional healing through his ongoing encounters with Christ. He does not see Christ as the conquering King who will free his people. Indeed, during the "Sermon on the Mount" Judah pointedly ignores Christ by walking away from the scene. He has no desire to build an army for Christ, because Rome's domination of Judea is not the source of his pain or the motivation for his subsequent actions following the death of Messala. The conflict for Heston's Ben-Hur is more clearly centered on the self-destructive hatred for Messala, which continues to haunt him through their shared music even after Messala's death. He is redeemed not through enlightenment but by learning to forgive and letting his hatred be purged. The words spoken by Christ from the cross in 1925 are represented as spoken within the film (via intertitles with quotation marks) while the centurions gamble for Christ's cloak (and, as I indicated, Ben-Hur is not present). In the 1959 version, Ben-Hur's redemption comes when he experiences those words directly, but the words are only metonymically conveyed to the audience through the transcendent Christ music. Indeed, Wyler's Christ is even more removed and silent than the Christ figure in the "silent" film.

Thus, one of Miklós Rózsa's signal achievements in the score for *Ben-Hur* is his ability to renegotiate and undermine the "feminine" connotations of the underscore for the film's male subjects, and to reengineer it as a newly *masculine* expressive form able to represent "authentic" masculine interiority and male intersubjectivity. But the musical representation of "authentic" masculinity in this film comes with a price. With the exception of the Divine relationship with God (which, being internal and spiritual, remains uniquely non-replicable), that price is the denial of all homosocial relationships in the film, especially the implicitly homoerotic one represented by Messala. While the music in *Ben-Hur* acts as both a salve for and the redemption from traumatic experience, with its concomitant emotional, psychological and spiritual effects, it also helps illuminate the fraught nature of homosocial relations in post-war America and the difficulty of representing those relationships in narrative Hollywood cinema at the time. Seen from this perspective, the triumphant "Christ" music that accompanies the final shot of the cross in the film can be understood as singing a lonely message for men in the post-war era: the journey of male becoming entails the erasure of man-to-man relationships—the sort of deep and meaningful relationships that helped the men of the Second World War negotiate and survive their various traumas.

NOTES

A version of this essay was presented at the International Musicological Society in Rome, 2012. I am particularly indebted to my research assistant while at the New Zealand School of Music, Melissa Cross, who made my job far easier than I deserved. Her tireless exploration, communication with numerous archives and libraries and meticulous eye for detail have greatly enriched both this essay and my larger project on representations of masculinity in post-war Hollywood soundtracks.

1. For a fascinating account of the role of the Biblical epic in the 1950s, especially the particular social role of DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, see Mitchell Morris (2014).
2. I will explore the relationship between the underscore in post-war Hollywood cinema and representations in greater depth and across a number of different genres in a forthcoming book on the subject.
3. The ever-ballooning budget for the 1959 *Ben-Hur* documented in both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* (from approximately $10 million to $15million—huge figures at the time) attests to the risks the major studios were prepared to shoulder in order to survive in the new business climate. There are

a number of cogent narratives regarding the demise of the studio system scattered across the Internet; for example, see *Tvtropes*, "Useful Notes: Fall of the Studio System." For an account in a more conventional format of the challenges the major studios faced in this period, see Lev (2003).

4. For an interesting account of Wilson's "grounding premise" and its political afterlife see Jamieson (1988).
5. Crowther (1959). In that same periodical, three days before the film's premiere, in response to Richard Nason's (1959) question as to why Wyler, "the master of the intimate moment," would want to tackle a modern remake of a story as broad and spectacular as *Ben-Hur*, Wyler himself acknowledged the film's contemporary significance: "because [...] this is still a contemporary story, despite the fact that it was published in 1880. As presented, it is the Biblical tale of an age without pity, without compassion, that has many parallels today."
6. In spite of the victory in the Second World War, there was still a strong isolationist bent, particularly within the Republican Party. Evidence of a deep, continuing rift was particularly on display in the battle for the Republican presidential nomination in 1952, pitting the candidate of the non-interventionist wing, Robert A. Taft, against the more internationalist Eisenhower.
7. For a description of Rózsa's early training and musical influences, see Hickman (2011).
8. Among the handful of melodic augmented seconds used in the score are those related to the East (Cue 11, throughout ("Desert Scene"), Cue 66, last beat of bar 5 ("Antioch")) or to the character of Ilderim: Cue 69 (last note of bar 1 to first note of bar 2 and from bar 3 to bar 4), Cue 79 (bar 7).
9. See, for example, Hickman's description of the genesis and character of Edgar Stillman Kelly's incidental music for the Broadway adaptation of the novel, premiered in 1899 (Hickman 2011: 59–62). Rózsa himself had tapped into the tradition of "Oriental" musical exoticism as early as 1940 with his score for *The Thief of Baghdad* and its skillful deployment of "Arabian" musical stereotypes. See also Preston (1994).
10. For example, in addition to music by other well-known composers (such as Wagner and Beethoven) for the other narrative segments of D.W. Griffiths's 1916 film *Intolerance*, Joseph Carl Breil's score for the Babylonian sequences more predictably incorporates a number of "Oriental" pieces by Western composers: Xavier Laroux's chanson "Le Nil"; "Possente Fthá" from Verdi's *Aida*; the "Russian" dance (slow and in minor) from Tchaikovsky's the *Nutcracker* (a strange, though still "exotic," interpolation given that Breil also has the choice of the "Arab" dance from the same work); and, of course, that quintessential (and ubiquitous) "Orientalist" warhorse, the "Bacchanale" from Saint-Saens' *Samson et Dalila*. My thanks to Gillian Anderson for letting me view her video recording of Griffith's film that includes her conducting the original score by Breil, comprising adaptations of the music cited above, along with his own original contributions. For a more complete listing of preexisting music used in Breil's score see Anderson (1990).
11. Though as Gillian Anderson (interview, December 15, 2015) points out, the descending sixteenth-note figures in portions of the melody, while not harmonically or tonally "exotic," could be read as an evocation of her "slithery" character.

Anderson suggests that Axt and Mendoza might have been more concerned with "coloring her as a sexpot" than as a specifically "Eastern" temptress.

12. Hickman (2011: 56) notes:

> As for romance and religion, the approach of Wallace differs in emphasis from that of Sienkiewicz [author of *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero* (1896)] and Douglas [author of *The Robe* (1942)]. Wallace's protagonist is torn between loving two women, Iras (the beautiful Egyptian daughter of Balthasar) and Esther. In the novel, Iras is not as malevolent as in *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925), and Esther is not the romantic focus as in *Ben-Hur* (1959). But the essence of the protagonist's choice between two females, a seducer and redeemer, is present. In addition, Ben-Hur discovers and follows Christ of his own accord; Wallace allows the male figure to embrace Christianity without female guidance. This contrasts with *Quo Vadis* and *The Robe*, where the woman leads the protagonist to Christianity. This linking of Christianity and femininity is adapted into William Wyler's version of *Ben-Hur*.

13. Hickman incorrectly identifies the mode for "Judea" as Aeolian. The prominent raised sixth scale degree in the melodic turn in the first four measures clearly positions the first part of the melody in Dorian mode (Hickman 2011: 102). The counter-melody that often accompanies the "Judea" melody confirms the Dorian interpretation (see Figure 16.4). While the appearance of the flat sixth scale degree in measure 5 might be heard as a move into Aeolian, the sequential nature of the melodic gesture could, in a more detailed analysis, be demonstrated to be a local modulatory move into the Dorian mode of the minor subdominant (B♭ minor in the key of F minor), though the lack of the sixth scale degree (the note G) neither confirms nor denies this interpretation. In any case, E flat at the end of bar six leads quickly back to the opening note (F) and tonic harmony of the beginning of the motif. For a condensed outline of all the motifs in the film, see Westcott (1989).
14. By only considering the melody itself (which does turn out to be Dorian) and not taking into account the harmony underpinning it, Hickman (2011: 103) does not acknowledge the complexity of mode (particularly the affective role of Mixolydian) in the music for Esther.
15. Like Westcott and Hickman, Stephen C. Meyer (2015: 157) notes the affective connection between Esther's motif and the "Judea" motif:"…Esther is another example of the domestic woman in the two-woman plot archetype: a woman of the tribe with symbolic links to the land. The musical affinities between these two themes make these links audible." Earlier, although he does not make the musical connection to spirituality, he also notes (143), "the domestic woman of *Ben-Hur* represents the spiritual values that stand in opposition to the decadent materialism of the city [i.e., Rome]."
16. "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony…" (Edward Said 1978: 5).

17. See for example, his several references to the "supine," "feminine" nature of the Orient, ripe for Western colonization (Said 1978: 138, 206, 220).
18. Westcott, 192.
19. Hickman (2011: 69). Hickman also notes (96) that "The Ben-Hur theme is the most aggressive in the score." Hickman's reading of Rózsa's music for the title character accords well with mine. It is worth noting, however, that though his brief comparison with the 1925 version points out the heroic qualities of Novarro's Ben-Hur played out within the drama, his gloss on the Axt–Mendoza theme for their Ben-Hur draws no real comparison with Rózsa's.
20. Ibid., 95.
21. A possible exception is the six bars constituting cues 105 and 106, in which the theme for Novarro's Ben-Hur takes on an angry, martial quality of dotted eighth and sixteenth notes along with triplets. This passage accompanies the scene in which Ben-Hur intervenes to stop Messala from throttling Sanballat, who has angered Messala with the terms of the wager.
22. Hickman (2011: 97) also notes the relationship of the Ben-Hur theme to the Roman themes.
23. Hickman (2011: 95–97) notes the similar intervallic construction of the two motifs, thus making a musically subliminal link between the two characters.
24. The rumored choice of the more famous Latin lover, Valentino, before the eventual casting of Novarro highlights the film-makers' intent to cast a Ben-Hur who would be an appealing love interest to female spectators in the 1925 film (Smith 1922). Ironically, Charlton Heston was not the first choice to play the title role in Wyler's film. Just slightly over a year-and-a-half before the premiere of *Ben-Hur*, and the same year that *Look* magazine named him "Star of the Year," MGM reportedly offered Universal Studios $750,000 for the loan of Rock Hudson to play the part (Hopper 1958).
25. As Hickman (2011: 70) notes, "In the novel, Ben-Hur is a boy of about seventeen and not a match for the more mature Messala. In this film version, Ben-Hur is already seen as physically equal if not superior to Messala."
26. The earlier column Hopper refers to is the "*Ben-Hur* Produces Spills and Thrills" piece that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on June 24, 1958. Dispatched from Rome, she describes some of the filming of the chariot race, describing the massive arena built by MGM and giving an overview of the main actors in the film (Charlton Heston, Haya Harareet, and Stephen Boyd).
27. Hickman (2011:70), referring to this scene, writes,

> Mild controversy has developed over Gore Vidal's suggestion that the script intended to imply a youthful homosexual relationship between Ben-Hur and Messala. According to Vidal, Messala's actions were to be seen as those of a rejected lover. Today, one can read into the dialogue and actions (throwing spears into the crossbeam) some suggestions of this interpretation, but most theater goers of the late 1950s and early 1960s would have been oblivious to

any such implications, and an overt presence of this subplot would have undermined the masculinity of the protagonist. There is a suggestion though that Messala has returned to Jerusalem with a male relationship, his constant companion Drusus. Particularly suggestive is the scene in which we see Drusus in the feminine role of reading while Messala is engaging in the masculine activity of practicing his whip.

28. Hickman (2011:94) notes, "The Christ theme, accompanied with parallel major triads, projects a sense of warmth and comfort. Hence, the film takes us on an aural journey from the harsh, cold world of conflict and hate of a pre-Christian world represented by the Anno Domini theme to the bright, joyful world of hope and love with the Christ theme."
29. Matthew 5:7 and 9.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Visual Poetry on Screen: Sets and Costumes for Ancient Greek Tragedy

Alejandro Valverde García

The work of scenographers (often called set designers) and art directors has yet to be the subject of in-depth study, be it from film critics or from scholars of the Seventh Art. Cinema has always been a kind of dream factory, capable of making producers rich and turning actors and actresses into stars. However, beyond the purely economic and commercial aspects of cinema, each film constitutes an independent work of art, its merit determined not only by the director but also by a large team of photographers, lighting technicians, makeup artists, tailors and carpenters. Many of these specialists, likely unknown to the public, are masters of their chosen craft and contribute greatly to the quality of the final work. A good screenplay is essential for a film to succeed at the box office. Film storytelling hooks the public when actors perform at their best and manage to connect with the audience. But we must not forget that cinema is above all an image in motion. The director must therefore pay particular attention to the visual aspect, which is often responsible for communicating all the details that dialogue elides.

Art directors must first understand the director's vision and approach in order to project their personal style and sensibilities through visual semiotics. Working in collaboration with lighting and photography specialists, art directors ensure the lines, forms and colors of their designs have the right impact on the audience, according to the kind of approach—naturalist, realist or

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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abstract—taken by the film. In this labor, itself the fruit of intense research and documentation, art directors may opt to emphasize grandeur and glamour, or to prioritize simplicity, which can at times prove more effective (Mikotowicz 1992). The choice of film set, set design and wardrobe all give us valuable information about not only the spatial–temporal coordinates of the drama, but also the historical and geographical context of the film production itself.

In the following pages, my intention is to appraise the valuable contribution of costume and set designers in films about ancient Greece,[1] especially those that recreate the ancient Greek tragedies. By following the most celebrated films of the 1960s and 70s, we can identify the great figures of European scenography and their influence on the epic films of the twenty-first century.

From the Fantasies of Méliès to the Glamour of Hollywood

Our familiarity with the quintessential Greek dress, the tunic, may originate in ancient Greek sculptures, paintings and reliefs, but its persistence in our visual culture can in large part be traced to cinema and its stars (Lee 2015: 1). Recall Rita Hayworth or Ava Gardner in the musical comedies *Down to Earth* (1947, dir. Hall) and *One Touch of Venus* (1948, dir. Seiter), or—also in the Greek style—Paul Newman and Richard Burton in *The Silver Chalice* (1954, dir. Saville) and *Alexander the Great* (1956, dir. Rossen), not to mention Marlon Brando's bare chest breaking hearts and molds amongst the splendor of the Roman Empire in his turn as Mark Anthony in *Julius Caesar* (1953, dir. Mankiewicz). However, our appetite for Greco-Roman dress and culture was not born in the Golden Age of Hollywood. We must instead look back to the first examples of European silent film.

Almost from its inception, cinema sought to provide scenes of daily life with which the public could identify. However, at the same time, its pioneers could not resist the idea of traveling back in time to recreate historical and mythological scenes which, up until then, had been the sole domain of literature and ancient or neoclassical paintings. Over a relatively brief period, Georges Méliès devoted countless meters of celluloid to a mythical—almost magical—Greece, teeming with fantastic creatures like sphinxes, centaurs and Cyclopes, along with Olympian gods, the Muses who inspired the great poets, and the most famous heroes.[2] Italian epic cinema, too, adapted Homer's poems before the arrival of sound. The slaughter of Penelope's suitors and the great wooden horse passing through the gates of Troy could

not fail to impress on the big screen, even when the scenery was painted on cloth and when the costumes were either made as quickly and cheaply as possible or, in many cases, supplied by the actors themselves. Nonetheless, in each of these films, the visual aspect was vitally important, the historical accuracy of sets or props taking a back seat to the main aim of impressing the audience at all costs.

The best example of the grand sets made for the ancient world, though not in this case Greek civilization, can be found in *Cabiria* (1914, dir. Pastrone), which was both a decisive influence in the subsequent films of Griffith (Borrell 2008: 161) and Cecil B. DeMille, and the film that established the visual language of the epic film (Llewellyn-Jones 2009: 565). From the 1910s, the hybrid Hollywood style provided the perfect opportunity to create a world of limitless fantasy and eroticism that drew on ballet and theater (Taylor 2002: 180). The fusion of ancient and contemporary worlds is evident in the makeup and hairstyles of the first film stars, as in the *Cleopatra* (1917, dir. Edwards) immortalized by a vamp Theda Bara, and other famous interpretations of the Queen of the Nile by Claudette Colbert (1934, dir. DeMille) and Elizabeth Taylor (1963, dir. Mankiewicz). At this moment in time, Greek history seemed not to interest filmmakers, being perhaps less known to the general public or less dazzling from an aesthetic point of view. It was instead Rome, the Eternal City, and especially the times of Julius Caesar and Nero, which delivered to audiences the most impressive sets and costumes, as well as repeated Oscar wins for the renowned artists enlisted to work on these multimillion-dollar epics.

On the one hand we have *Helen of Troy* (1956, dir. Wise), one of few films about Greece (Vivante 2013:23) with sets by Elso Valentini and wardrobe by Roger K Furse; whereas, in the Roman setting, we find Hugh Hunt's magnificent scenery for *Quo Vadis* (1950, dir. LeRoy), *Julius Caesar* (in collaboration with Cedric Gibbons) and *Ben-Hur* (1959, dir. Wyler). Later, in the 1960s, we see the splendid work of Fred Valles for *Spartacus* (1960, dir. Kubrick), and of Vittorio Nino Novarese and Irene Sharaff for Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra*, a production that spared no expense on costume design (Solomon 2001: 69).

Flavio Mogherini, Cinecittà and the Triumph of Hercules

Flavio Mogherini (1922–1994) studied in the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, before working as a scenographer in hundreds of films under such directors as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Mauro Bologini (Pergolari 2009).

Of his films set in the ancient world, his creations for *Ulisse* (1954, dir. Camerini) and *Attila, il flagello di Dio* (1954, dir. Francisci) are of particular note. He also collaborated in *Le fatiche di Ercole* (1958) and *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (1959), each directed by Pietro Francisci, and, later, was involved in scenography for *Satyricon* (1969, dir. Polidoro). His work is notable for its striking creativity, although at times it betrays historical accuracy for contemporary tastes. In *Ulisse*, for example, he perfectly recreates a somber palace in Ithaca in full Mycenaean style, against which he juxtaposes the bright court of King Alcinous, where we can discern Minoan paintings and objects. However, in the fantastical retellings of the labors of Hercules the aim was above all to emphasize the physique of the actors, the scenery's clutter of anachronistic objects always being placed in the service of Steve Reeves' muscles or of the female characters at his side. This mythical Greece was completely unreal, but it was so popular at the box office that, from the 1960s, there was a torrent of films cut from much the same cloth. Unfortunately, their budgets were often so constrained that directors neglected art direction, reusing costumes and sets as long as they were cheap (Cano Alonso 2014: 20). After all, what filmgoing fan of action and fantasy was going to be able to distinguish between Greek and Roman style? Indeed, Romanizing Greek sets made these Italian films more familiar and accessible to a North American audience, ensuring their distribution and commercialization (Nisbet 2006: 34).

Another resource at the disposal of scenographers is the use of real archaeological sites to film sequences. The peplum film *Le Baccanti* (1961, dir. Ferroni) opens with a chorus of young people dancing with the Acropolis of Athens as a backdrop, but the film never returns to that setting, instead turning to the clichés of the genre by introducing haircuts, makeup and miniskirts more at home in the 1960s than classical Greece. That same year also saw *Atlas* (1961, dir. Corman) filmed in different parts of the Greek capital, but which largely neglected the splendor of the Greek ruins for a greater focus on the pectorals of the hero of the hour. In this instance, the Greek government promised economic support and a number of extras, but the budget was eventually so reduced that the filming of the feature was beset with problems.

Meanwhile, the two most accomplished mythological productions, each the work of special effect master Ray Harryhausen, also used natural sets. *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963, dir. Chaffey) and *Clash of the Titans* (1981, dir. Davis) each made use of the famous Greek temple of Poseidon at Paestum south of Naples (García 2008: 26). In the first feature, it is the setting for the sequence in which the harpies pursue the blind man Phineas, and, in the second, it recreates the gates of Hades, where Perseus confronts the terrifying Cerberus.

Though it entails a clear anachronism in that we do not see them intact, making use of ancient sites has proven as effective in modernized versions of ancient Greek tragedies as in period adaptations. Thus there is the decadent Rome of *Scipione detto anche l'africano* (1971, dir. Magni), the comic sequences of *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995, dir. Allen) filmed in the theater of Taormina in Sicily, as well as Aristotle's open-air classes in *Alexander* (2004, dir. Stone). The Odeon of Herodes Atticus in Athens, the citadels of Tiryns and Mycenae and the theaters of Delphi and Dodona have been used time and time again as sets for European films of the 1960s and 1970s (García 2008: 33; Lapeña 2008: 251; Michelakis 2013: 191).

The Four Faces of Greek Tragedy in Film

The first film based on ancient Greek tragedy was *Prometheus in Chains* (1927, dir. Gaziadis), a Greek production filmed during the live performance of Aeschylus's famous tragedy, staged by Angelos Sikelianos and his wife Eva Palmer at the Delphi theater. Palmer designed the costumes and each of the characters' masks herself, giving a particularly dominant role to the chorus of Oceanides, who, with their robes of greens and blues, recreated the sensation of waves (Valverde 2014: 69). After thorough research into classical ceramic paintings, reliefs and statues, she managed to bring to life this unique experience that combined music, dance and acting. The work's theatrical nature is evident in the movements, vocalizations and gesticulations of the chorus and of the actors (Kyriakos 2013: 198). Indeed, the wardrobe and stage design followed the norms set by the Hellenic National Theater. Nevertheless, the film version was conceived as a separate entity, following its own narrative rhythm and making use of shots from different angles, including close-ups of some of the actors.

Since antiquity, actors' masks have created a sense of estrangement and dislocation that eases the spectator's submission to the illusion of the drama taking place before their eyes (Kriukova 2008: 17). It is no coincidence, then, that other significant films based on the tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus––*Oedipus Rex* (1957, dir. Guthrie) and *Les Perses* (1961, dir. Prat)—again make use of the mask (MacKinnon 1986: 55). In spite of their appropriation of theatrical techniques, these are not simply works of theater filmed in a static fashion. In the case of Tyrone Guthrie, for example, the masks and the colors of the costumes (which each carry their own semantic charge) seem to change according to the action and the use of close-up shots, appearing almost alive (Winkler 2002: 53). In this way, rather than impeding the development of the drama, they powerfully stimulate the audience's imagination.

In the first years of the 1960s, Greek cinema also turned to Greek dramatic poetry in the *auteur* cinema of Tzavellas, Koundouros and Cacoyannis, whose films were recognized in international film festivals and would prove to be responsible for rekindling the torch of ancient Hellenic culture. But I also want to attend to a second period, in the 1970s, in which various New Greek Cinema directors drew again from ancient Greek myths to create works with a unique combination of mythical allegory, psychoanalysis and political references (Kyriakos 2013: 195). The role of myth as a vanguard of social change can be seen clearly in Vassilis Fotopoulos's *Orestis* (1969) (see Figure 17.1), in Kostas Ferris's *Prometheus in the Second Person* (1975), and in Theo Angelopoulos's *The Travelling Players* (1975). Their re-readings of the myths imposed new aesthetic rules through symbolic language and the distortion of received conventions. Hence, while in the first period the key concern was the faithful translation of tragic texts to film, in the second it was to adapt them in the most surprising or novel ways possible.

In 1961, the Greek film director George Tzavellas became a pioneer in adapting ancient Greek tragedy by bringing to the screen—to enormous

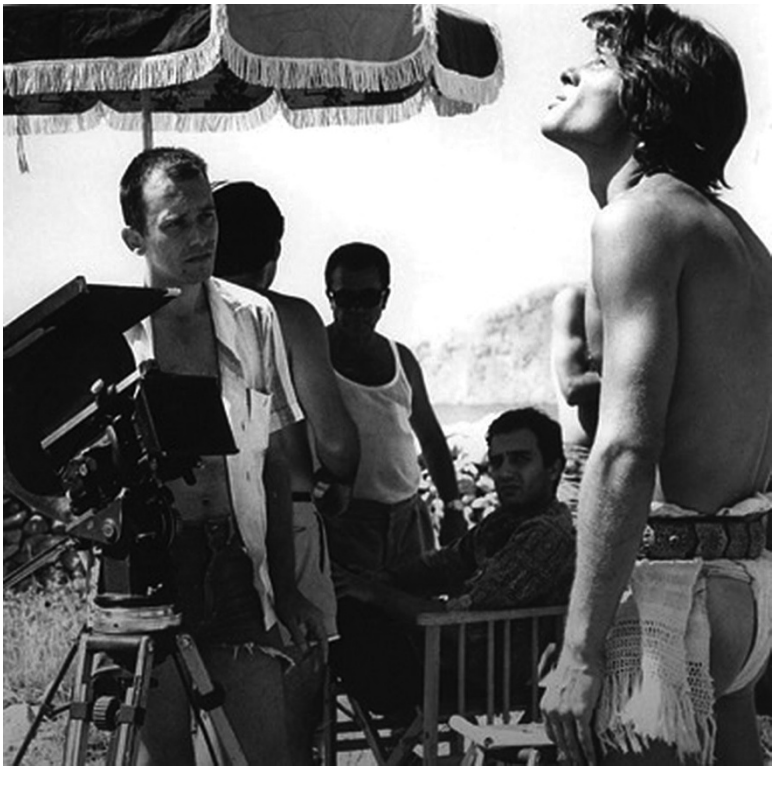

Figure 17.1 Vassilis Fotopoulos's *Orestis* (1969).

success—Sophocles' *Antigone*. It is important to keep in mind that these works were intended to be seen and heard. The interaction between the visual and the aural is fundamental. In Greek tragedy, the sets, wardrobe, music and special effects all vitally contribute to the drama to create an aesthetic, emotional and intellectual experience for the audience (Winkler 2002: 44). Tzavellas put Giorgos Anemogiannis—a first-rate artist experienced in theatrical productions at the Epidaurus Festival—in charge of art direction. Anemogiannis, avoiding the aesthetic of the Hollywood epics and Cinecittà's mythological films, opted instead to maintain a conventional theater style. Although masks were not used, he did make use of some striking beards and wigs for the chorus of Theban elders. The film's pacing, the use of effective flashbacks, the excellent photography in black and white, and the memorable performances of Manos Katrakis and Irene Papas in the leading roles made this film a veritable work of art and a prime example of how to adapt an ancient text to the screen.

Soon afterwards, Greek-Cypriot director Michael Cacoyannis, working in the style of the Russian formalists, exceeded Euripides himself with his magnificent version of *Electra* (1962). He entrusted wardrobe and set design to the painter Spyros Vassiliou, who coupled maximum stylization with a minimalist aesthetic (Karalis 2012: 100), as seen in the at once plain, yet also symbolic, dresses sported by Queen Clytemnestra (Michelakis 2013: 198). Cacoyannis replaced the use of masks with masterful use of the camera, as shown in the final close-up of the queen in his film *Iphigenia* (Winkler 2002: 57). The framing, movements and the use of zoom and detail shots serve to communicate the hidden thoughts and emotions of the tragic characters. Filming entirely in natural exteriors, *Electra* represents the first realist approach to ancient Athenian drama, with scenes of peasants working the land, and women beating olive trees or going to a spring for water (Valverde 2012b: 159). Thus counterpoised, the sequences filmed in the fortress of Mycenae seem dreamlike and profoundly symbolic. The minimalist visual style is evident in the representation of the city's nobles, who are luxuriously dressed but are, like cold marble statues, immobile. The Cyclopean walls, claustrophobic spaces and blank stares leave no place for tenderness or complicity, structural architectonics insistently distorted to aesthetic ends (Salvador Ventura 2004: 179).

Continuing along the timeline of cinematic representations of ancient Greece, the director Nikos Koundouros took a particular interest in the costume design for his film *Young Aphrodites* (1963). Building on Cacoyannis's realism by stripping away any superfluous elements, Koundouros turned to the nude as the form closest to reality. While nudity had already been depicted at the beginning of Greek cinema,[3] it nevertheless paved the way for other

directors who would turn to naturalism in order to film particular scenes of their tragic adaptations, as we will see later in the nudes of *Orestis* or *Iphigenia*.

In addition to the theatrical approach underlying Anemogiannis's designs, the stylization of Vassiliou's and Koundouros's naturalism, we find a fourth option for recreating the world of ancient Greek tragedy in the work of designer Denny Vachlioti (1932–2011).[4] The melodrama *Phaedra* (1962, dir. Dassin)—for which work she received an Oscar nomination—is a modern day adaptation of Euripides' *Hippolytus*. The characters are dressed in modern clothing according to their social status and age, but the classical references are constant. For instance, the protagonist's meeting with her son takes place in London's British Museum, where we see the marble sculptures pillaged from the Parthenon by Lord Elgin. This is accompanied by a brief aerial shot of the Acropolis of Athens, and of Anthony Perkins, who, in one sequence of the film, adopts the graceful posture of the Discobolus of Myron. Nevertheless, the most accomplished feat from an aesthetic standpoint is the counterpoint that Vachlioti achieves in the film's final scene, where Melina Mercouri, clothed completely in white, makes her way through a group of women in mourning, immediately summoning up the image of the chorus in ancient drama.

Oedipus and Orestes According to Dionysis Fotopoulos

Three different adaptations of Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex* were filmed in 1967, the most famous of which, the Italian film *Edipo re*, saw its director, Pier Paolo Pasolini, seek to controvert the typical aesthetic of the Hollywood epic films. Inspired by previous European films that had addressed ancient Greek tragedy from different perspectives, Pasolini put Danilo Donati (1926–2001) in charge of art direction, resulting in unusual props made from wicker, leather and goatskin, as well as a range of decorations made from colored rocks and shells (Cano Alonso 2014: 332). The film's recreation of the ancient cities of Thebes and Corinth bore no resemblance to what audiences had, up until then, come to expect. The characters' clothing, and in particular the wardrobe of the queen Jocasta, evoked a military epic of indeterminate temporal and spatial location. In doing so, the director sought to break with exactly those coordinates, and to foreground instead the universal and eternal character of ancient myth (Carla 2008: 93). Pasolini would continue along this line when he returned two years later to adapt another Greek tragedy, *Medea* (1969), relying on the designs of Piero Tosi (1927).

The other two 1967 versions of *Oedipus Rex* were filmed in Greece during the military Junta and each made use of archaeological sites as a backdrop to the actors delivering Sophocles' ancient verses. The British director Philip Saville moved his film team to the Dodona theater to film *Oedipus Rex*, relying on the quality of Paul Roche's exceptional screenplay (MacKinnon 1986: 71) and the input of some of the greatest specialists of Greek cinema (Valverde 2012a: 260). Walter Lassally—Michael Cacoyannis's usual cinematographer and his collaborator in *Electra*—was put in charge of photography. Nikos Despotidis, whose work on Tzavellas's *Antigone* had been widely praised, was put in charge of sound, and Denny Vachlioti took control of wardrobe design, this time focusing on harmonizing realistic details with the theater aesthetic (Solomon 2001: 277).

König Ödipus, a German production directed by Oswald Döpke for television broadcast, marked the debut of a young Greek scenographer, Dionysis Fotopoulos (1943). The brother of another scenographer, Vassilis Fotopoulos, with whom he had collaborated (without any mention in the credits) in making the sets for films as well-known as *America America* (1963, dir. Kazan) and *Zorba The Greek* (1964, dir. Cacoyannis),[5] Dionysis Fotopoulos had been an unknown until that moment. Trained in painting under the tutelage of Yannis Tsarouchis and Yannis Moralis, Dionysis would study ancient Greek drama at length, in time becoming the greatest scenographer of Greek theater (Valverde 2012b: 162). His wardrobe designs for this adaptation of *Oedipus Rex*, produced in very little time, managed to recreate a completely convincing ancient Greece. Far from Hollywood glamour and the magnificent settings of other productions, his creations made the characters of the drama seem like flesh and blood. In his deft touches, we find a taste for simple, almost documentary-style naturalism (Valverde 2012a: 262), shown as much in the treatment of the costume fabrics and accessories as in the other scenographic details. Making use of the ruins of the Cyclopean walls as a backdrop, the silhouettes of the chorus and the characters of this tragedy seem to come to the audience from a distant past, inviting them into the action of the drama[6].

Two years later, still under the censorship of the Greek Junta, Dionysis's brother, Vassilis Fotopoulos, was granted permission to film in the walled city of Vathia, in the Mani peninsula, in what would be his first and only directorial outing. *Orestis*, was not, in spite of its title, a film adaptation of Euripides' work in a strict sense, but instead a novel iconographic project in which the director used ancient myth to shed light on the political and social events of the moment. Interposed between the different scenes are photographs and documents related to the nuclear threat, the world wars, and the pacifist protests of the twentieth century. Filmed somewhat unevenly, and

plagued by budget issues, the film did not receive its desired theatrical release, leaving it to languish deep in the Greek Film Archive, known only by name and one isolated still. The most attractive part of this film is unquestionably its experimental visuals, from the unusual approach to framing and focusing shots to the re-creation of a minimalist Mycenaean Greece. Against the realism preferred by other scenographers, Dionysis again charged his naturalist decorations with profound symbolism. The textures of the clothes, the play of grey tones, the ongoing contrast between black and white, and the omnipresence of the shield and helmet of King Agamemnon, each have a concrete significance in the scene. A sequence meriting particular attention occurs when Electra and Pylades give in to their passion on a red blanket while the hapless Orestes wanders aimlessly through the dusty streets of the city, watched all the while by a chorus of women dressed in black. Their expressions, interspersed with shots of the sweaty bodies of the lovers, presage the ominous dénouement of the tragedy. By the end, this new Orestes, who personifies the plight of the modern man—victim of industrialization, political corruption and violence—dies at the hands of those he loves the most.

Iphigenia, the Pinnacle of Scenography

From the 1970s, film adaptations of ancient Greek tragedy addressed ever more directly the problems of contemporary society, gaining realism and verisimilitude. European film directors turned time and time again to the ancient texts in order to respond to current economic, political and social conflicts affecting the lives of modern men and women. In the same era in which Roberto Rossellini embarked an ambitious project series of pedagogical TV films and Miklós Jancsó released *Szerelmem, Elektra* [*Electra, My Love*] (1975), a personal re-reading of the ancient myth that modernized its message (MacKinnon 1986: 117), Michael Cacoyannis continued on his quest to bring to the screen another two Greek tragedies that had previously appeared on stage in Italy, France and the United States. As it coincided with the Greek Junta and his own European exile, he had his sets for *The Trojan Women* (1971) built on the outskirts of Madrid. Drawing from Euripides' text but imbuing it with contemporary political and social connotations, the film gave the original anti-war character of its tragic verses new force through scenes of brutal violence against women and children. The stylization of sets and costumes that characterized Cacoyannis's *Electra* here take on an additional degree of simplicity, with the sets reduced to a single ruined fortress that represents a destroyed and humiliated Troy. Amongst the dust and the smoking columns, stand Queen Hecuba and the chorus of Trojan women

dressed with tattered black tunics that suggest grief and desolation. Only the treacherous Helen (Irene Papas), dares to wear a bejeweled white dress in an attempt to seduce her husband Menelaus, implying her dominance over the Achaean army and the Trojan slaves (Vivante 2013: 45).

Five years later, after the fall of the Junta, and with the support of George Tzavellas, who at that moment was the president of the Greek Film Centre, Cacoyannis decided to begin the filming of his third tragic film, *Iphigenia* (1977). With a comfortable budget that allowed him to employ the best possible film crew, a group of actors specialized in ancient drama, and a considerable number of extras, Cacoyannis had no hesitation in placing Dionysis Fotopoulos in charge of the film's artistic direction. The film would become a landmark of Greek cinema, with an official screening at the Cannes Film Festival and even an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film.

In our journey through the most celebrated film adaptations of the classic texts and their scenographers, we might well consider Michael Cacoyannis's *Iphigenia* the culminating work of scenography, which, in the hands of Fotopoulos, truly becomes a category of visual poetry. Loyal to his previous works of Athenian drama, he produced realistic models that captured the essence of the era in which the action was set, while adapting itself at the same time to the specific meanings that the director sought to convey to his audience. While he again uses the ruins of Mycenae to recreate King Agamemnon's palace, the walls have none of the coolness of *Electra*, expressing instead Queen Clytemnestra's tenderness towards her children and the joy of the chorus of youths that attends the protagonist until the fateful ending of the film. The arid setting and burning sun, splendidly photographed by Giorgos Arvanitis, work to frame the beauty of the female characters, as in the memorable scene in which mother and daughter, close to the beach at Aulis, change their clothes behind a great red cloth that suggests the nearness of death (Bakogianni 2013: 221).

Fotopoulos pays particular attention to the design of Agamemnon's cabin, the setting of the film's most intense confrontations. As with the Mycenaean atmosphere he recreated in *Orestis*, he uses a straightforward layout that allows the actors free movement in a central space while complementing it here and there with symbolic details, like large amphorae, Mycenaean shields and wicker and leather objects that immediately situate the audience in the time and space of the myth. However, the most notable aspect of his work lies in the costume design, which includes a great variety of uniforms, armor and helmets for the generals and soldiers of the Greek army, as well as those worn by Agamemnon, Menelaus, Ulysses and, most importantly, Achilles. He also designs a variety of veils in light colors and hats for the girls who accompany the innocent Iphigenia, as well as transparent white linen clothes

for the priests of the goddess Artemis that heighten by contrast the dark, sinister aspect of the priest Calchas.

Fotopoulos focused above all on the costumes for Irene Papas, in order to achieve the solemnity demanded by the character. Her dresses, the long tunic suitable for a queen, the travel hat, the necklace and fan, give every shot in which she appears a suitably majestic aspect (see Figure 17.2). But, at the same time, by including a sequence in which Clytemnestra—stripped of her sumptuous attire, with a nightgown and cloth over her head—sings a lullaby to her daughter, Cacoyannis sought also to convey a sense of tenderness and care (Valverde 2012b: 163). In the last scenes of the film, though, her face and clothes become progressively darker as it becomes clear that there is no possible escape, leaving only resentment towards her husband, and a desire to avenge her daughter's murder. The close-up shot in which we

Figure 17.2 Irene Papas as Clytemnestra in Michael Cacoyannis's *Iphigenia* (1977).

are shown the hands of mother and daughter parting forever carries a moving visual force. Here again, the two mental states are counterpoised with different colors. The white of Iphigenia's wedding veil symbolizes her purity and resignation to her fate, while the dark blue of the queen's tunic represents her sadness and indignation.

Interestingly, one of the most effective aesthetic decisions in *Iphigenia* is photographing the actors nude. In keeping with his habit of using the film's first few minutes as a prologue to the action, Cacoyannis begins his film with an accelerated tracking shot of the thousands of ships waiting to leave for Troy and, later, different shots in which the Achaean army is shown sitting in groups or relaxing on the beach. The burning sun and the absence of favorable winds mean that the soldiers cannot bear waiting around any longer. Crossing the sea, they expected riches and glory from the sacking of Priam's city, but here, detained by circumstance, they become victims of boredom. This mass of men, crowding in before King Agamemnon to demand a solution, or in its mere presence throughout the film, symbolizes the danger of an easily manipulated and anonymous crowd. The army leaders wear imposing masks, and some soldiers wear their military equipment, but the majority either cover their nakedness with a simple cloth or go without clothing altogether (Fotopoulos 2009: 82). Besides the realism that these scenes seek to establish, the naked body symbolizes the primitive state of man, in which passions and brute force rule over reason. As the events of the film play out, we see that true power does not rest with King Agamemnon but rather with the group of soldiers who, by letting themselves be controlled by their most basic instincts, act as puppets for the priest Calchas and the shrewd Odysseus.

A different case can be observed in the shot of the hero Achilles, in which we see him naked, lying face down on the beach and blowing on the sand. This image, inserted at the moment when the caravan of women turns towards the Greek camp, carries a different meaning. Cacoyannis here visually translates the original verses in which the chorus of girls speak of the beauty of the young son of Peleus. The text of Euripides alludes to the warriors running exercises on the seaside with their horses and, interestingly, that is what we see in a synthesized form: a naked young man and, behind him, his horse. We watch as the words of the ancient tragedy are translated into concrete images, revealing Fotopoulos as a true master.

Epilogue of a Genre

It is difficult, from our contemporary perspective, to conceive of how the Greeks of the classical era thought about Athenian drama. Athens, birthplace of democracy and philosophy, bequeathed to the Western World a new

aesthetic form of understanding the world that joined word, music and dance. Experiencing a performance at that time was nothing like seeing a play, a film or a television episode on our own. Going to the theater at Epidaurus had much more to do with venerating the gods, with the revelation of arcane mysteries, or even the curative power of words. Something extraordinary must have happened in the audience because, as the performance ended, a purifying force had relieved their souls of worries and anxieties. The tragic poets, conscious of their immense responsibility as educators of the Athenian people, composed their immortal verses to reach the deepest part of their fellow citizens' hearts and free them from their ills. But the immense power of *logos* was heightened by the magic of its staging. The omnipresence of the chorus, their rhythmic movement and singing, filled Sophocles' tragedies with emotion. The archaic and priestly garb, the footwear and masks, brought Aeschylus's characters to life. The perfection of the painted scenery and the details of the scenography conveyed the dignity of Euripides' heroines.

Having arrived at this point, we might ask ourselves whether cinema has indeed been able to transmit the immense cultural legacy of ancient Greece. The preceding pages are a brief chronological commentary on some of the films that attempted to bring ancient Greek tragedy to the modern public, focusing attention in particular on their wardrobe and set design. The most important examples, concentrated in the 1960s and 1970s, frequently underline their faithfulness to the classical texts, presenting their characters and environment in a realist mode. In the years following, it was television that devoted itself to recreating chapters of history (particularly those related to Christianity and ancient Rome), but more recently, it has turned its attention also to the Homeric epics and the diverse stories of Greek mythology. On the other hand, ever since the overwhelming success that was *Gladiator* (2000, dir. Scott), there has been a renaissance in epic films that place great importance on artistic direction (Borrell 2008: 164). The most accomplished example, and a direct heir of the tragic film adaptations discussed here, is *The Passion of the Christ* (2004, dir. Gibson), whose symbolic realism approaches in many respects the trilogy filmed by Cacoyannis. Nevertheless, there seems to be a notable lack of interest in making new film adaptations of Greek tragedy, with the exception of some isolated examples of auteur cinema in the European market. Of these, I would cite in particular the thought-provoking rereading of the Oedipus myth (and homage to Cacoyannis's *Stella*) in *Strella/A Woman's Way* (2009, dir. Koutras), in which a transvestite becomes his own father's lover (Kyriakos 2013: 201). Another example would be the modernizations of the Oedipus myth presented in a comic vein by director Woody Allen.

Perhaps cinema has turned its back on Greek tragedy because it demands the audience's complete intellectual and spiritual engagement. It is enormously surprising that the latest productions about ancient Greece and Rome have not overcome the missteps of the golden age of Hollywood or of the adventure films of Cinecittà. While new technologies have certainly made it possible to see the Roman Forum in all its splendor, a thousand ships setting out for Troy, the Lighthouse of Alexandria and even the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, they have not provided the public with any intelligent reading of the events of the past. Rather, the screenplay in many cases follows to the letter the thousand-and-one versions that have appeared on the silver screen since the 1950s and from which we had imagined we had moved on. If we consider the neo-mythologization taking place at the beginning of this century, then the situation seems even more dire. Countless versions of Hercules, Perseus and Theseus threaten once more to fill our cinema screens with their biceps and save us from terrible monsters extracted not from Greek mythology but some modern comic or novel. Given this environment, it is not uncommon for producers to quickly reject the idea of adapting with any seriousness the universal stories of ancient Greek drama.

As I write these final lines, a Spanish film director, Alejandro Lorenzo Lledó, has begun preparations to shoot his next film, *Lemnos, la tragedia del engaño*. An adaptation to the big screen of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, it is scheduled for release in 2017. On this particular occasion, there is no gesture towards modernization, no display of special effects, but a reinterpretation of the ancient text that the audience can easily apply to the real world today. Perhaps the moment has arrived to re-read the classics and to give ourselves over to the poetry of new images.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Nacho García and Óscar Lapeña for their suggestions and guidance over the course of writing this chapter. As a topic that lacks a specific bibliography, I am indebted also to Martin M. Winkler, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and Vrasidas Karalis for the documents that they have shared with me. Finally, I want to thank the scenographer Dionysis Fotopoulos—who has been present in a special way during the birth and development of this work—for his collaboration and friendship.
2. Unfortunately, the greater part of Méliès mythological films have disappeared, although some can still be viewed through Internet portals like YouTube. As for the other films cited in this chapter, almost all are easily accessible, as many have been republished on DVD and some remastered. The exceptions are *König Ödipus* (1967) and *Orestis* (1969), which are available only in their original copies held in Berlin and Athens respectively.

3. Here I am referring to the film *Daphnis and Chloe* (1931), directed by the poet Orestis Laskos and filmed in natural settings. In this adaptation of Longus's ancient novel, full frontal shots of the protagonists are treated with delicacy and innocence.
4. This designer, whose original name was Theoni Athanasiou Vachlioti Aldredge, had worked under Michael Cacoyannis on *Stella* (1955), and designed costumes for the most famous of Jules Dassin's films that were filmed in Greece: *Never on Sunday* (1960) and *Topkapi* (1964). In 1974, she received the Oscar for Best Costume Design for her work on *The Great Gatsby* (dir. Clayton).
5. Vassilis Fotopoulos received an Oscar for Best Artistic Direction in Black and White for his work on this film.
6. The book *Dionysis Fotopoulos: Cinema*—compiled in 2009 by the Benaki Museum in Athens and the Thessaloniki International Film Festival as an homage to his set and wardrobe designs for cinema—contains many photographs and models by the artist, and is cited in the bibliography. The pages dedicated to the films *König Ödipus* (pp. 18–25), *Orestis* (pp. 38–51), *Iphigenia* (74–97) and *A Dream of Passion* (pp. 98–113) are of particular interest.

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adaptations of ancient Greek tragedy, such as The face of tragedy: From theatrical mask to cinematic close-up (Martin M. Winkler, 2002) or recent studies of the aesthetic of Michael Cacoyannis's films (Bakogianni, Salvador and Vivante). As for the scenography, wardrobe and architecture of films set in ancient Greece or Rome, interesting studies (García, Hanesworth and Lapeña; Lapeña; and Llewellyn-Jones) can be found spread across different scholarly journal articles and in monographs that I cite in the bibliography.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Filming the Ancient World: Have Film Historians Made a Spectacular Omission of Epic Proportions?

Harriet Margolis

My film studies training includes Allen and Gomery's outline (1985) for doing film history: consider the subject in terms of technology, economics, social concerns and aesthetics (not necessarily in that order). My original brief for this chapter, to examine the impact of technology on the genre of ancient world films, proved to be a non-starter because the genre has too many variables across its history (for an exemplary list, see Solomon 2001: xix). Instead, I learned that economic considerations have played the largest, most consistent role in the sporadic appearance of ancient world films.

Applying Allen and Gomery's aesthetic and social categories, we find that the cultural capital of the ancient world in history and literature has played a role in the production of ancient world films, and that film producers have valued that cultural capital because it has translated into economic capital. There was the hope that the high social status of such material would elevate the low social status of the medium as well as the fact that familiarity with the stories and imagery would overcome the early medium's limited ability to tell anything but the simplest stories. There was also the producers' ability to leverage off marketing that had already made ancient world plays and novels famous.

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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One could, however, also argue that not all ancient world films offer much cultural capital despite resulting in economic capital, and that some films have degraded the subject matter's cultural capital, for example, *Hercules* (Pietro Francisci, 1958) or *300: Rise of an Empire* (Noam Murro, 2014). Even before film's existence, an eroticism associated with the ancient world had "been an important feature of much ancient world painting and sculpture from the *fin-de-siècle*" (Christie 2013: 123). From the beginning, individual films exploited the opportunity for lascivious costumes and dancing justified on the grounds of "authenticity"—even while the producers claimed the subject matter as a defense against charges of immorality.

Along with Allen and Gomery's four categories, I also learned to consider film in terms of production, distribution and exhibition, ending up with seven interdependent headings. Taking examples from the history of ancient world films, we can see that the aesthetic desires of cinematographers and directors have led to technical improvements in lenses and film stock. This developing technology requires money, and sexually tantalizing images might attract paying audiences, but they also raise social concerns that can lead to censorship. I therefore think of all facets of individual films, and of production generally, as multiply determined but with economics as the dominant factor.

As a film scholar, I was not interested in "ancient world films" until Pomeroy's book *Then It Was Destroyed by the Volcano: The Ancient World in Film and on Television* (2008). As a filmgoer as well as a film scholar, I knew that *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914) had influenced early US film production. I knew that Cecil B. DeMille had made Bible films before and after the Second World War and that these had been grandiose but commercially successful affairs, while the 1963 *Cleopatra* (Joseph Mankiewicz) was (falsely) publicized in the magazines my family subscribed to at the time as a financial failure even before its release. I also watched sword and sandal movies and Ray Harryhausen special effects films set in the ancient world in the local fleapit that served as a Saturday afternoon babysitter. Arriving in New Zealand just as Peter Jackson switched from splatstick to a sophisticated use of computer generated imagery (CGI) for narrative purposes, I learned about CGI and software such as (or similar to) MASSIVE in the new epics—such as *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), *The Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001–2003) and *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000)—that cover old territory from science fiction through fantasy to the ancient world.

Before *Then It Was Destroyed*, these were the points at which I connected with ancient world films. Regarding DeMille and the sword and sandal films, I felt some innate as well as learned disdain on aesthetic grounds. Otherwise, I considered the significance of the individual films primarily in

terms of their key personnel or of their place in film history at the moment of their production: for example, *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960), from the perspective of auteur theory, as a Kubrick film; and within its sociopolitical context, because of Dalton Trumbo's publicly acknowledged contribution to the script and, therefore, to the film's successful challenge to the House Un-American Activities Committee's (HUAC) crippling impact on blacklisted Hollywood talent.

In other words, until *Then It Was Destroyed*, it didn't occur to me to list ancient world films as a genre. Although Michelakis and Wyke (2013: 12) ask, "What justifies the grouping together, under the banner of antiquity, of films with different thematic preoccupations and arguably distinct generic histories?" it seems sufficient that classicists have produced studies of a selection of films they've identified as sharing distinguishing characteristics. But there's another equally compelling reason. Because "ancient world films" is a plausible label for use by a library, shop, website or other source making films available to watch, these films can be marketed as a group that will satisfy a set of audience expectations. That's the economic function of genre labels.

One can study those expectations, evaluate films in terms of how they handle them or even consider the relative importance of (creating) such a genre. "Creating" a genre is never a useless pursuit, because discussion of a group of films as a genre leads to reconsideration of those films and their context, shedding new light on both. For classicists, studying ancient world films is useful, *inter alia*, for understanding their field's significance in the contemporary world or engaging students in considering the varying representations we have of the ancient world and the rhetorical purposes that these representations might be said to serve.

However, from the point of view of film studies, especially film history, I see the genre's value differently from classicists. The first (then) current history of world cinema that I read, Rhode's *A History of the Cinema from Its Origins to 1970* (1976), pays little attention to ancient world films individually and none to them as a genre. Since 1982 Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, an annual silent film festival, has changed our understanding of film history, as more and more material produced around the world during the silent era has been recovered (Cook and Bernink 1999: 93). Although film histories after Rhode have changed what they say about silent film production, they still show no particular interest in ancient world films *per se* (see, for example, Thompson and Bordwell [2003] or Cook and Bernink [1999]). While there has been an increasing number of books on ancient world films in the last twenty years, they have come primarily from classicists rather than film scholars.

Michelakis and Wyke declare that the "fascination with ancient civilizations so evident in the first few decades of cinema has been almost totally ignored despite its central importance to the development of early cinema" (2013: 2), and later that "evidence from Britain and elsewhere would suggest … that antiquity films played a decisive part in the transformation of film production, distribution and exhibition in the period from 1910 to 1915" (18). Solomon, a classicist whose *The Ancient World in the Cinema* was first published in 1976, rightly notes that "the genre … claims many mature, powerful, artistic films" (2001: xviii). However, Solomon also claims that "many 'ancient' films have served as critical turning points in the cinema's overall development" (ibid.). How could film scholars have missed the genre's significance?

Given that Michelakis and Wyke can refer to "more than eight hundred" silent films of varying length that pertain to the ancient world, perhaps film studies should have paid more attention. Not knowing what percentage of total film production these ancient world films represent, however, means that we can't reach conclusions about the relative importance of the genre on numerical grounds alone. Somewhat contradictorily, Michelakis and Wyke also observe that, "apart from the handful of celebrated silent epics, [these eight hundred films] seem to have left scarcely any visible traces on the institutional and cultural memory on which later film practitioners have drawn" (2013: 1). That is, not just film historians but film-makers have ignored ancient world films.

The following reconsideration of early film history with ancient world films in mind will have a US slant, because "Hollywood" (mainstream film-making controlled by US producers before and after they located production primarily in California) has been the dominant international force in commercial production, distribution and exhibition of film since the 1910s. If ancient world films influenced "cinema's overall development," then they did so by influencing Hollywood.

Hollywood's dominance rests partly on appropriating new technological developments and successful practitioners from around the world, but primarily on the size of the domestic market that was willing and able to enjoy the new medium. In film's first decade as a public entertainment, America's market accommodated foreign as well as US films, but US producers had the advantage over their international competition of being able to recoup their costs and make a profit from their domestic market alone. Until the 1910s this muted their interest in exporting their films.

The first public screenings of 1895–96 in Europe and America attracted a relatively upper-class audience interested in film's scientific and technical potential. The films themselves being "primitive," the novelty wore off and

this audience lost interest. "Before 1904," American film "producers sold film prints, and exhibitors showed them in vaudeville houses, music halls, rented theaters, and fairground tents" (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 33)—generally not venues for gently bred ladies and gentlemen. It would be over a decade before US producers and exhibitors could begin a serious effort to attract middle- and upper-class viewers to the movies.

As for content, "The early film's economic dependence on vaudeville … [as a venue] dictated the creation of films … modeled … largely on types of stage acts: the variety act, the fictional narrative, the scenic (views of interesting locales), the topical (presentations of current events), and the trick film" (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985: 159). After 1905 films became "longer, using more shots and telling more complex stories" (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 33), but the links with vaudeville lingered, especially in programming patterns. From 1905, film-specific venues appeared in the form of nickelodeons (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 37), whose success exceeded the capacity of US film-makers to satisfy demand. In 1907 two-thirds of the films released in the United States came from Europe, particularly from France's Pathé, "known for a wide variety of subjects" that suited US programming needs, including historical and social dramas (Musser 1990: 488). One study of film's role in the transition from a Victorian, predominantly agrarian, white Protestant America to the twentieth century's multicultural, predominantly urban population focuses on New York City, where nickelodeons "catered to the immigrants' tastes for foreign films, pure entertainment, and shorts portraying their political and economic situation" (May 1980: 147–148).

These foreign films, especially those accused of lax morals in their content and presentation, came primarily from the Catholic countries of France and Italy. Many of the nickelodeon owners were Jewish, several of whom became producers. Since most immigrants between 1895 and 1910 were non-Protestant and from the edges of Europe, this combination of films, exhibitors and audiences disturbed what had been a relatively coherent Protestant hegemony. The American way of life seemed to be threatened, and film producers and exhibitors came in for both criticism and attempts to shut them down.

There were, of course, white Protestant American film-makers making films of American life with white Protestant audiences in mind, including Edwin S. Porter, who worked for Thomas Edison, holder of many patents for film production and exhibition. Edison resented competition, domestic and foreign, and did his best to sue his competitors out of business. By 1908, however, he changed tack and persuaded his major US competitor, American Mutoscope and Biograph (AM&B), along with some smaller

producers to see that their collective interests were best served by forming the Motion Picture Patents Corporation (MPPC) (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 39). Among other things, this entity went to court to prohibit non-US product access to the US market, arguing *inter alia* that these films were unsuitable for US audiences on moral grounds (Thompson 1985: 12). At the time, France—especially Pathé, which distributed some relatively racy films (9)—had "managed to seize world markets before the USA did" while Italy was also "a strong competitor in the pre-war years" (1). France and Italy retained their international standing outside the United States until the First World War, but in 1909 France had to make an accommodation with the MPPC, and Italian films became comparatively rare (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 39).

According to Bordwell (1997: 27), cinema's development as a distinct art "is largely a chronicle of technical progress … develop[ing] toward growing expressivity, subtlety, and complexity in telling a story on film." The first movies astonished simply by being; put a picture of almost anything on the screen and the technology's novelty assured an audience's interest. Film studies calls this earliest cinema "the cinema of attractions"; the next step has been called the "cinema of narrative integration." The former "directly appeals to the spectator's attention through a series of exciting moments of spectacle" while the latter "subordinates those sensory appeals to the logic of an unfolding story" (Keating 2014: 7).

> The cinema of attractions puts the cinema itself on display, including the devices of cinematography, offering special effects, electric lighting, and the spectacle of movement as attractions to be enjoyed for their own sake. … The attraction does not go away during the cinema of narrative integration; its energy persists in many forms, from the glamorous close-ups of classical Hollywood stars to the spectacular digital effects of today. (Keating 2014: 7)

The effect on cinematography of the transition from attraction to narration, in Europe and the United States, was that "filmmakers increasingly used lighting and camerawork to serve the needs of storytelling" (Keating 2014: 11). Technology, aesthetics, social demand and money worked together at this transitional moment in film history to establish its viability as a medium.

Film producers and their marketers soon learned that films must constantly offer some point of difference from what people had seen before. The Italian ancient world films that began arriving in the United States offered numerous pointers. For example, American distributors were much taken with an advertisement around 1909 for a production of *Gli ultimi giorni di*

Pompei that was never made, but which "locat[ed] the anticipated product in relation to the recently formulated cinematic aesthetics of its feature length, vast scale, huge casts, elaborate costumes, accurate scenography, historical realism, outdoor locations, visual spectacle, and clever special effects" (Wyke 1997: 160). Wyke also claims that "Italian films … developed their own formal strategies of editing and camera movement, staging, set design and special effects," while acknowledging that "such films borrowed from the whole spectrum of nineteenth-century modes of historical representation (literary, dramatic, and pictorial)" (1997: 24). To what degree are such claims correct about how extensively and consistently such innovations can be attributed to ancient world films?

One immediate problem is determining first appearances. The first date for most things to do with early developments in the history of film has changed as archives and other sources reveal forgotten information. For example, from film's earliest days the once-forgotten Alice Guy-Blaché directed trick films, fairy tales and biblical films, including films with color and special effects, while working for the Lumière brothers. Yet, an important longstanding generic distinction soon arose in film studies, associated with the Lumières and their *actualités* (forerunners of documentary filmmaking), on the one hand, and with Georges Méliès and his "trick" films that entertained through spectacle and dramatic storytelling, on the other.

Although it has always been difficult to distinguish between documentary and fiction (in that documentary film can only attempt to present its material realistically, that is, as a convincingly accurate representation, but which must do so through telling a story), this distinction shows that the impulses behind the origins of cinema come from both *dulce* and *utile* camps. The Salvation Army, for example, made an easy transition from using magic lanterns to using cinema to illustrate religious lectures (Goldsmith 2010: 10) and "the Joye collection of 1128 titles … assembled by a Swiss cleric … [was] used, in part, for teaching" (Dixon 2013: 29). Yet, whatever the religious and educational impulses of the reformers, these were swamped by the demand for entertainment from a growing urban class of workers with cash and time to spare.

Ancient world films draw on both traditions: documentary and fiction, on the one hand, and teaching and entertainment, on the other. The accuracy and realism of sets, costumes, representations of battles and so on have often been marketing points ("These films are educational!"). Meanwhile, the spectacle of "chariot races, gladiatorial combat, triumphal processions, land and sea battles, the persecutions of Nero, or the seductions of Cleopatra" (Wyke 1997: 107), as well as the dancing girls and half-naked gladiators, has made them both entertaining and popular since their inception in 1897

(Solomon 2001: 3; Michelakis and Wyke 2013: 1). Solomon correctly observes that "success usually necessitates historical authenticity *and* cinematic entertainment" (2001: xvii).

Regarding trick films, Lant (2013: 60) writes that Méliès and British pioneer R. W. Paul used "in-camera editing to make antique objects disappear in puffs of smoke, or mummies transform instantly into lovely, curvaceous princesses." "The first film version" of *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Paul, 1900) was "merely eighty feet of film showing a volcano erupting and people fleeing from a collapsing ceiling" (Solomon 2001: 4). When Michelakis writes, though, that these pre-1903 films "can be seen as examples of how early cinema uses classical mythology as a platform for the display of optical tricks" (2013: 147), I must insist that early cinema used *anything* that worked to display the medium's abilities. As Shepherd notes of pre-1910 biblical films, "So well known were scenes such as the burning bush, the parting of the sea and the giving of the manna that they were ideally suited to the so-called 'cinema of attractions'" (2013: 264).

The point is that the tricks and the spectacle mattered more than the subject; any immediately recognizable imagery that could evoke a larger narrative context was useful, including "antiquity [which] was already quite popular in the contemporary theatrical, literary, and educational worlds at the end of the nineteenth century" (Solomon 2001: 3). Poems, plays, paintings, nursery rhymes and more, from Longfellow, Tennyson and Shakespeare to Lottie Blair Parker, Frank L. Baum and Arthur Conan Doyle, in the United States alone, if an audience could be expected to recognize it, then a short film based on it was probably made (see Musser [1990] for examples of the breadth of popular culture's influence on the subject matter of films before 1907).

The trick film made a crucial contribution to film-making through its interest in and development of special effects. To make trick films, "filmmakers experimented with superimpositions, matte shots, dissolves, time-lapse photography, and other effects. Many effects … later handled in postproduction were executed initially by camera operators" (Keating 2014: 15). These effects, especially the more recent ability not just to manipulate but also to create them in postproduction, first enabled and eventually became the backbone of ancient world films. Without matte shots and miniatures, for example, along with the talent and imagination of cinematographers such as Mario Bava or special effects technicians like Gordon Jennings, ancient world films could never have achieved the convincing visuals necessary to their success. Without CGI, twenty-first century films would be too expensive to make. Yet, if ancient world subject matter had the cultural capital to lift early cinema up towards respectability,

the very trickery that made it possible to represent the ancient world sometimes dragged it back down away from respectability in the eyes of American audiences, who at one stage considered special effects a form of dishonest representation (Brosnan 1977: 22 and 49).

By 1903, when "the film's single action became part of a brief series of causally linked events" (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985: 160), Edwin S. Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* and *The Great Train Robbery* (both 1903) became instant classics of US film-making that brought native headlines to life on screen. American film producers were also making historical films, but they were usually based on America's own past, as might be expected from a relatively young country facing a challenge to its national identity.

American film producers were even making "ancient" films. According to Wyke, the United States was second only to Italy in producing films about Rome, even though "material remains of the classical past did not litter America's landscape as they did Italy's" (1997: 17). Comparing ancient world films from both countries would be difficult, though, since "more Italian films set in ancient Rome have survived from the silent era than American ones" (1997: 32). However, "most 'ancient' films made by America's early cinematic imitators favored mythology over history" (Solomon 2001: 102). So when Michelakis asserts that Americans wanting to see the "journeys of Odysseus and the fall of Troy" *had* to watch "imported, European productions" (2013: 150), he may or he may not be correct.

Dixon (2013: 28) calls it "natural" that the "well-developed film industries" in Catholic France and Italy "would be interested in Bible stories … For Italian producers, ancient Greece and Rome … [as] part of the national iconography … [were] promoted through film as part of Italy's international image." In 1907 it was worth the financial risk for Cines, a Roman production house, to open a New York "subsidiary" to market its films directly in the United States rather than through agents (Thompson 1985: 7). So while Italian films would become known internationally for their ancient world stories that took advantage of their native locations—and that were both local *and* topical for their domestic market if one considers how these stories were read within their political context (Wyke, 2013: 278; Dorgerloh 2014: 232)—it is important to remember that national cinemas elsewhere relied on stories familiar to their audiences through their own local and frequently more current contexts. Film historians have noted, for instance, the importance of the Spanish-American War of 1898 both for increasing public interest in films at a moment when it was waning and for establishing historical representations as a component of American film-making (Burgoyne 2008: 24–25).

It is also important to note what has been forgotten. "One of the most widely disseminated statements, which by the force of its circulation has assumed the value of truth, is that Italian silent production consisted of a series of 'super-spectacles'" (Bruno 1993: 14). One reason "the 'super-spectacles' have become representative of the entire silent filmography of Italy," Bruno explains, is that "the [independent] producer George Kleine, the most prominent distributor of Italian silent films in the United States, deliberately selected big productions, almost exclusively historical and literary epics" (ibid.). Bruno focuses instead on Elvira Notari, an Italian film-maker based in Naples, whose films drew upon "the values of local, regional, and popular culture," were "shot on location" and employed "nonprofessional actors and local types" (ibid.). Her production company, Dora Film, also had an office in New York City, where many of the Italian immigrants were of Neapolitan origin (123).

While Spanish-American War films were one factor reviving US interest in the new medium, Passion Play films were another (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 28). These began as little more than tableaux of individual scenes, but as movies grew longer and scenes more complex, some exhibitors ran a number of these films in sequence. Pathé Frères produced "the first long film about the life and Passion [sic] of Jesus … in 1905"; "remade in 1908," it was "further expanded and re-released in 1914" (Stichele 2013: 171). Released in color, the film "had to be retinted on an annual basis" (ibid.). Stichele speculates that "the use of colour … may … reflect the visual aesthetics of a Catholic context," while Catholics' "tradition of Visual images and Passion plays" [sic] made them "quick[er] to embrace the new medium of film to proclaim the Good News" than were Protestants (188).

"Feature" originally meant something "unusual" rather than length, but while nickelodeons generally screened one-reel films, some longer films began to appear: "Before 1909, these were typically prizefight films or religious epics and were often shown in legitimate theaters rather than nickelodeons" (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 41; for a fuller discussion, see Musser 1990: 193–223, who adds the category of travel films). From 1909, there was the occasional screening of a multi-reel film that might be viewed ensemble, but "because the MPPC's rigid release system allowed for only single reels, such films had to be released in one part per week" (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 41). This limit sorely tried one of AM&B's most important directors, D. W. Griffith, who had wanted to make longer films much earlier in his career than his producers would allow (Simmon 1993: 8).

So far we have seen that well before 1909 there was precedent in the United States for historical films (e.g., representations of the Spanish-American War); religious films (e.g., the Passion Play films), some of which

Thompson and Bordwell even call "epics"; and for multi-reel films (e.g., fight films). The fact that these longer films were often screened in "legitimate" theaters also set the precedent for the marketing strategy called "road-showing" (Schaefer 1999: 99; Solomon 2001: 62) that involved special screenings at special venues for what became known as "prestige films." We have also seen that not all Italian films imported into the United States were ancient world films. And in 1909 going to the movies was not a regular upper-class or even middle-class pastime.

However, producers and exhibitors wanted to change that, without losing their existing mass market (Christie 2013: 122). In practical terms, producers upgraded their venues, established a differential system of exhibition practices for different sorts of films and audiences and regularly advertised the improved technical and aesthetic qualities of their product. In aesthetic terms, they opted for appealing to white Protestant America's standards. For example, "both European and American filmmakers" filmed Shakespeare's plays "as a means of demonstrating the significant contribution film could make to culture," among them Cines, which "had regularly released Shakespearean adaptations before the launch of the feature-length film *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* ([Enrico Guazzoni], 1913)" (Wyke 1997: 75–76).

When the Italian ancient world spectacles began arriving in the United States they had company. On the heels of *The Fall of Troy* (Luigi Romano Borgnetto and Giovanni Pastrone, 1911) came *Queen Elizabeth* (André Calmettes, Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton, 1912) and *Camille* (André Calmettes, Louis Mercanton and Henri Pouctal). The French films were arguably more influential. Certainly, in contrast with their lack of attention for Italian production as a whole, English-language film histories have generally acknowledged the French *film d'art* movement's influence on US marketing, exhibition and production.

"The words *film d'art* refer both to a type of filmmaking and to a specific production company … [that] was founded in 1907"; as a type of film-making, *film d'art* "aimed at a different, socially more elevated audience" on the basis of "the [highbrow] stories it could tell" (Williams 1992: 63–64). "The Film d'Art brought the prestige of the Comédie Française" as well as other Parisian art world personnel "to its productions, and it attracted an audience which normally would have avoided the cinema. In 1908 alone [it] … produced among other films" *Tosca*, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Kiss of Judas* and *Britannicus* (all directed by André Calmettes) (Rhode 1976: 38). While *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise* (André Calmettes and Charles Le Bargy, 1908), with a musical score by Camille Saint-Saëns, marked the beginning of the Société du Film d'Art, *Queen Elizabeth*, starring the internationally renowned Sarah Bernhardt, was "one of the last French *film d'art* spinoffs"

(Williams 1992: 80). Salt credits the *film d'art* movement for influencing acting (1983: 119), although Bernhardt's performance, despite its positive critical reception, was perceived by many US exhibitors as well as audiences as laughable (Bowser 1990: 92). By 1912 US audiences would have grown accustomed to relatively restrained performances associated with Griffith, Mary Pickford and other directors and actors in US films. Pearson has called this a "verisimilar" rather than a "histrionic" acting style, for which Griffith claimed credit (Pearson 1992: 18–37; Simmon 1993: 14, 19), although he and Pickford practiced it while working for New York's major theatrical producer and innovator, David Belasco, before their film careers began.

Why did longer films develop in Europe before America? While the conservative MPPC was restricting exhibitors to one reel, "in Europe, the exhibition system was more flexible, and multireel films were common" (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 41). "The first really major release of a foreign feature during this period [1910–1914] came with *Dante's Inferno* [Giuseppe de Liguoro] in 1911" (Thompson 1985: 26), although Wyke argues for the greater significance of Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* (1913). The latter was an

> international success, and its exhibition was everywhere packaged as a prestige event. In London, its premiere was held at the Royal Albert Hall in the presence of King George V. In New York, it was the first film ever to play in a Broadway theater usually devoted to the "legitimate" stage, where it ran for twenty-two weeks. (Wyke 1997: 127–128)

"The higher admission prices such features could command led to further imports and expanded domestic production" (Thompson 1985: 26). "In 1911, Vitagraph brought out its three-reel *Vanity Fair* [Charles Kent] as one film. By the mid-1910s, the feature film [as we understand the term today] would become the standard basis for programming in more prestigious theaters" (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 41) for special US as well as foreign films (Schaefer 1999: 99).

Films screened at prestigious theaters were distributed on a different basis than "ordinary" films; because they would open "exclusively" at prestigious theaters, this phase of distribution is known as the "exclusive era." Yet "the first successful genre of the 'exclusive' era was the thriller … [which] offered dynamism, speed, modernity and suspense … different qualit[ies] from those of the antiquity subjects" (Christie 2013: 116–117).

Meanwhile, "aspiring producers of the silent-one-reel film" had been proving that "the United States, too, could reach for high art by turning to

classics of stage, poetry, and literature" (Bowser 1990: 42–43), along with "historical subjects" (Burgoyne 2008: 12).

> Producers and exhibitors could demonstrate that the motion-picture show was an appropriate place for children and that they were bringing high culture to the masses. Many an enterprising exhibitor arranged with a teacher to have children study the subject of a film in the classroom in advance of its coming to the theater. (Bowser 1990: 43; cf. Solomon 2001: 103)

While Solomon writes that between 1907 and 1913 "important [sic] individuals also produced 'ancient' films," pointing to D. W. Griffith's *The Slave* (1909), with Mary Pickford and Florence Lawrence, and the Helen Gardner-produced *Cleopatra* (1912) (2001: 5), "the increasing artistic ambitions of film-makers" worldwide produced D. W. Griffith's *Pippa Passes* (1909; based on Robert Browning's poem) and "the Italian Cines company's film *La Campana* (1909), based on Schiller's poem *Die Glocke*" (Salt 1983: 131). Many French, Italian and American films, in other words, brought high art to the cinema independent of the ancient world.

Longer films meant more complicated films, not just in their narratives but also in their technical and other qualities that come under the heading of "production values." Production values usually require an investment of money in costumes, lighting, sets and so on—things that contribute to the spectacle of cinema as well as to claims of authenticity. By 1912 claims about "extensive" research leading to accuracy in representation became regular components of marketing for adaptations of *Dante's Inferno* or *Homer's Odyssey* (both Francesco Bertolini, Giuseppe de Liguoro and Adolfo Padovan, 1911), for example—but also for films of American history such as *Custer's Last Fight* (Francis Ford, 1912) (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985:100; Wyke 1997: 133).

Solomon identifies "the virtual birth not only of the ancient world in the cinema but also of the epic cinema" with Arturo Ambrosio's production of *The Last Days of Pompeii* in Turin in 1908 (2001: 4), although why it is an epic is unclear apart from a running time longer than one reel. Michelakis says, "The term 'epic' was first introduced as a generic title for films in 1911" (2013: 150). For Burgoyne, "Enrico Guazzoni inaugurated the form with *Quo Vadis?* in 1912" (2008: 34), contending that the union of "spectacle, lavish set design, and narrative" in "works such as *Quo Vadis?* (1912), *Cabiria* (1914), and *Spartacus* ([Giovanni Enrico Vidali,] 1913)" made them both "epic" and "influential" (2008: 25). Certainly, pre-First World War Italian producers had the advantage over their American competitors in

that their "production costs of hiring extras and building sets" were lower (Thompson 1985: 35). When *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone) and *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido) appeared in 1914, "gigantic sets began to fill the screen, and hundreds of extras were hired to re-create realistic crowd and battle scenes" (Solomon 2001: 4). This sounds more like the production values that later characterized the epic.

In arguing that these films overcame "the limitations of the stage" and that their settings "necessitated the replacement of the indoor stage with outdoor location shooting" (ibid.), Solomon's claims seem simultaneously too broad and too vague. Outdoor—even location—shooting characterized the earliest cinema, which had needed the sun's lumens to expose the film (Cook and Bernink 1999: 53). Also, before settling in Hollywood, producers regularly sent their film crews "everywhere" (Bowser 1990: 152), partly for lack of studio space and partly in pursuit of sunnier climes during northern winters. According to Brosnan, "it took the coming of sound to force Hollywood film makers into the … self-contained worlds of the big sound stages" (1977: 23).

Lighting has always been a complicated combination of technical, aesthetic and economic issues. Salt notes that, with the nickelodeons' demand for more product, "standardised lighting conditions in the big glasshouse studios were needed" to increase productivity; therefore "supplementary artificial light—usually from specially adapted street-lighting arcs—came to be added to the diffused sunlight" (2009: 24). Directors and their cinematographers had to adjust their film-making practices accordingly, learning as they practiced. The more talented and creative they were, the better they wanted to be able to tell their stories and for their films to look, whether shot in indoor studios or outside on location or on outdoor sets. Griffith and his cameraman Billy Bitzer stood out as a team who found technical solutions to aesthetic problems.

The need to compete with foreign imports led to increasing budgets for US films along with changing technical demands for lenses, lighting and film stock, for example. While this increase in the scale of what filled screen images was a marketing draw in itself, there's also an aesthetic aspect to it: How does one balance the details of a narrative with the scale of these images? What happens to shot composition and framing, to editing, to camera angles and distance from action, and other parts of putting a story on screen when the money spent on the big elements demands a focus on them? Directors and their producers had to accustom themselves to a new way of thinking about filling images and linking these images together so as to entertain their audience with the spectacle but also to engage that audience in the story.

Griffith was already on to it, according to Salt's discussion of staging, referring particularly to Griffith's handling of crowds in *Romance of a Jewess* (1908), "shot in the Jewish quarter of New York." Salt adds that "other film-makers … followed his lead," if only "to a limited extent" (1983: 116). While referring to Pastrone's "technical innovations" in *Cabiria* (1914) as having "revolutionized filmmaking," even Solomon acknowledges that "Pastrone himself had used massive crowds a few years before in *La Caduta di Troia* (1911)" (2001: 48).

Salt's discussion of Italian staging is worth quoting at length.

> At first theatrical tradition continued to provide the model, as it had in earlier years, but by 1910 other influences had begun to appear, particularly in Italy. … The compositions of *L'Inferno* are largely modeled on Gustave Doré's engravings for *La Divina Commedia*, and in *La Caduta di Troia* the influence is from the Alma-Tadema type of salon painting. However, … the emergence of a more purely filmic approach ["to large-scale staging"] can also be seen in some films. Sometimes this is just a matter of the conjunction of the topography of the location and the relatively unorganized enthusiasm of the extras, and sometimes it is the result of camera placement … Both the Salon Painting strain in staging and the purely filmic approach developed side by side in such films as *Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompei* ([Giovanni Enrico] Vidali, 1913) and *Quo Vadis?* …. The kind of composition that is sometimes used to combine principal figures with massed extras in D. W. Griffith's films from 1913 onwards is anticipated in *La Sposa del Nilo* ([Enrico Guazzoni,] Cines, 1911) *though this may not be a matter of influence, but rather of directors with similar backgrounds producing a similar solution to the same filmic problem.* (1983: 116 and 119; emphasis mine)

Influence is always difficult to argue.

Salt discusses other instances of similar, almost simultaneous developments to do with editing, lighting and camera movement:

> It took some years for Griffith to develop the Insert Shot as a way of drawing attention to narrative objects with significant connotations. … One of the still very rare examples is in Griffith's *The Massacre*, which was made at the end of 1912. … Another is in the Ambrosio company version of *Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompei* (1913). (Salt 1983: 131)

Although acknowledging Bitzer and Griffith's pioneering lighting techniques (that were not immediately adopted by others), Salt cites Vitagraph as "the most advanced company" for studio lighting, especially evident in a

horror film from 1912 called *Conscience* (Maurice Costello) (1983: 95, 98). He adds that "parallel developments in lighting … can also be observed a year or so later in the films of the major French companies" (ibid.). Between 1909 and 1913

> Italian practice, which at the beginning of the period entirely followed French models, and in the middle of it shows influences from Vitagraph and Nordisk as far as contemporary subjects are concerned, finally developed an element of individuality …. One example … is the use of lighting applied from a low angle in Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* (1912). This usage was then carried further in *Cabiria*. (Salt 1983: 95)

Developments in camera movement were still in their infancy.

> Parallel tracking shots, in which the camera moves at a fixed distance from actors moving on a parallel course, continued to occur on rare occasions such as car and train chases, but tracking towards and away from groups of actors who were not moving a great deal … had a world-wide vogue in the wake of … *Cabiria* … Such tracking shots were referred to at the time as "*Cabiria* movements," for it seems that no-one had taken much notice of the earlier tracking shots on quasi-static scenes in American films, except perhaps Giovanni Pastrone. (Salt 1983: 153)

Pastrone, Solomon states in his list of *Cabiria*'s pioneering attributes, "was the first to use the camera dolly, which he patented" (2001: 48). Salt, it must be noted, is known for his close analytical and statistical analyses of the details of shot length, composition, editing and other technical aspects of film images, on the basis of which he has successfully challenged earlier assertions about film history. Writing some years after Solomon, he also had access to a larger selection of films for comparison. Salt, for instance, can refer to British and American examples in which tracking shots

> move in much closer to the actors rather faster than the originals in *Cabiria*, and also have trajectories fairly straight in or out from the scene. And all of these tracking shots incorporate a certain amount of panning as well, which those in *Cabiria* did not. (Salt 1983: 48)

Yet Salt does provide some comfort for Solomon: "Despite these earlier examples, there is no question but that the really influential use of tracking shots on quasi-static scenes occurred in *Cabiria*" (1983: 87). Being first may

be less important than what one makes of one's invention or what others do with it; most of all, it depends on being noticed.

Cabiria is also credited with initiating the so-called Maciste films, named after a secondary strongman character (Solomon 2001: 5). Wyke notes that, like *Quo Vadis?*, *Spartacus* "valorizes the populist figure of the strongman" (1997: 44). Before Maciste, Spartacus, or any other movie strongman, there was Eugen Sandow, who traveled the world displaying his physical strength along with his physique. Edison began circulating *actualités* featuring him as early as 1896, and they traveled as widely as Sandow himself. As the title of Chapman's (1994) *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* indicates, Sandow is considered a founder of body-building, and thus a key predecessor for Steve Reeves, who was known as a body-builder before he became Hercules. Figures such as Sandow, Harry Houdini and the fictional Tarzan, according to historian John Kasson (2001: 3), "represented both an ancient ideal of manhood and a modern commodity." A famous photo of Sandow shows him posed in imitation of the sculpture entitled *The Dying Gaul*; his "resemblance to the physiques found on classical Greek and Roman sculpture was no accident, as he measured the statues in museums" (Wikipedia, Eugen Sandow).

As important as *Cabiria* and other Italian epics may have been, there are further arguments against setting them up as quintessentially important, not least the indubitable importance of D. W. Griffith as a creative talent. Twentieth-century film history usually presented him as the most significant figure in the development of film as an art form, a claim probably initiated in 1913 by the man himself in a full-page newspaper announcement (Simmon 1993: 14). This was not necessarily a response to the challenge to his status posed by the increasing number of spectacular European successes since Griffith was leaving AM&B to begin the next phase of his career as, he hoped, a more independent artist who deserved to be recognized for his talent.

Still, he can't have been pleased by the competition from other directors at home and abroad for his place in the history books. And indeed, in France, "an influential article" appeared in 1911 that "looked back at the rapid evolution of cinematography," citing "Maggi's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* as a master work" because it "revolutionized the market for films by its artistic sense, its accurate *mise-en-scène*, the cleverness of its special effects, the grandeur of its conception and execution, and the exceptional quality of its photography" (Wyke 1997: 159)—all qualities Griffith had been working toward despite producer-imposed limitations. Given the vagaries of international distribution previously alluded to, one must consider, on the one hand, the

extent to which European audiences had the chance to see the best of what American producers had to offer—including Griffith's films—and, on the other hand, the extent to which audiences availed themselves of those opportunities.

Even the 1913 *Quo Vadis?* is an Italian challenger to claims of *Cabiria*'s importance on the basis, as Wyke lists, of

> its feature length, its translation of the novel's complexity into a filmic structure that (through the use of both close-ups and long shots) alternated individual and collective experiences of imperial Rome, its naturalistic acting, its elaborate, three-dimensional set designs, and its exploration of depth of field (especially through the movement on screen of vast crowds of extras). (2013: 120)

She adds that the arena sequence, influenced by

> the iconography and technologies of … circus spectacle[s], … departed in numerous ways from the nineteenth-century conventions of both the visual arts and theatrical practice. … The whole sequence was enhanced by the specifically cinematic, and relatively new, techniques of expansive long-shots and brief pans around the crowd … [including] the exploitation of point-of-view shots … (2013: 120)

Again, who did what first is both debatable and less important than what happened next.

For example, although Solomon argues that *Quo Vadis?* and *Cabiria* influenced American film-making, he adds that none of the Italian films "had an impact on the development of the American film industry comparable to D. W. Griffith's two 'ancient' spectacles, *Judith of Bethulia* (1913) and *Intolerance* (1916)" (2001: 8). However, just as *Cabiria* "borrowed from its predecessors" (48), so *Intolerance*, too, derived its look from various sources. Simmon refers to French and Italian films, but also "eighteenth-century French theatrical traditions," "nineteenth-century Academic painting" and "a German intellectual tradition of historical theory" (1993: 142–143).

In preparation for *Intolerance*, "as DeMille did after him, Griffith first had his set decorator (Frank Wortman) look into several scholarly books" (Solomon 2001: 235) to produce sets with "a workable balance between historical authenticity and cinematic atmosphere" (29). The Babylonian scene, for which the film is best known, "with its authentic archaeological detail, its massive setting, its kinetic humanity, and its technical innovation, exemplifies why *Intolerance* is one of the first great wonders of the cinematic world, a landmark of the cinema" (236).

Yet for Hollywood and American history, no film could match the significance of Griffith's first historical epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which President Woodrow Wilson, an Ivy League historian, famously praised. Never mind that in social terms Griffith's film and Wilson's praise were controversial then and remain so: the film influenced film-makers around the world for the technical artistry Griffith brought to bear on his subject. It's Griffith's films, for example, that the early Soviet film-makers studied and wrote about, not *Quo Vadis?* or *Cabiria*.

Griffith, though, had a rival close to home: DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915) compared with Griffith's work in terms of its "editing techniques, camera movements, [and] acting styles" (Wyke 1997: 166). Wyke notes that post-First World War Italians preferred *The Cheat* to local product perceived as old-fashioned in style, and Williams points to the earlier French reception of *The Cheat* shortly after the film's US release, especially Colette's discussion of the film's production values, the acting and her pleasure in the lighting. As Williams puts it, "DeMille's film looked *new*. It had an unusual, highly visible cinematographic style" (1992: 81).

Although DeMille made a sparkling *Cleopatra* in 1934, J. Gordon Edwards made an earlier version in 1917 that was "a vehicle for the display of Theda Bara's sensual exoticism. … Its visual pleasures became the spectacle of erotic seductions as much as military maneuvers" (Wyke 1997: 89). "Reviewers placed the [later] film's visual style—its exhibition of spectacular historical reconstructions and opulent production values—in the tradition of DeMille's biblical epics *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *King of Kings* (1927), and *Sign of the Cross* (1932)" (92). The reviewers had good memories: budgetary constraints meant that the special effects team incorporated footage originally shot for *The Ten Commandments* and *The Sign of the Cross* (Brosnan 1977: 47; Solomon 2001: 145).

For the last of these, Paramount Studios boasted, "More than a year was spent in research and preparation. Accurate historical settings of a magnitude and magnificence never attempted before were built to ensure true realism"—although "accuracy would always come second to the need for an entertaining narrative" (Malamud 2009: 189). However, with its "stylish backless gowns, the erotic display of female flesh, the lascivious orgies," *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) prompted "outrage from various American religious groups and women's organizations" (Wyke 1997: 137), and "was largely responsible" for the studios' self-censorship guidelines known as the Hays Code (Burgoyne 2008: 35). Despite the fact that *The Sign of the Cross* "supplied Paramount with millions of dollars just as it was facing bankruptcy" (Wyke 1997: 137), "moral pressure" from the American Catholic establishment left "little incentive to make films set in antiquity" (Solomon 2001: 11).

There had been "cinematic spoofs of silent spectacle films set in ancient Rome" in cinema's first ten to fifteen years (Malamud 2009: 196). "The use of dialect and slang [in the intertitles] to mock the affectations of the middle- and upper-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestants appealed to working-class audiences in general and Jewish and Catholic immigrants in particular" (195–196). *Roman Scandals* (Frank Tuttle, 1933), which became "United Artists' top-grossing film" of 1934 (199), "also deflated the myth of the grandeur and decadence of imperial Rome, a myth that the Hollywood film industry in general and Cecil B. DeMille in particular helped to disseminate in American culture" (ibid.). Robert Sherwood, who wrote the script with George S. Kaufman, "made no secret of his dislike for cinematic epic spectacles set in antiquity" because their "colossal sets and special effects dwarfed narrative content and meaning" (ibid). He particularly "disliked" the combination of "pious sentimentalism" and spectacle in DeMille's films (ibid).

Sherwood's disdain aside, DeMille's "flair" usually brought financial success. So Twentieth Century-Fox chose him and *The Robe* (1953) to launch CinemaScope, a widescreen technology sufficiently superior to its predecessors to make production and exhibition of the new format financially viable. For the same economic reasons there was a roughly simultaneous investment "in the technological novelties of Technicolor … and stereophonic sound" (Wyke 1997: 27). To hedge their bets, the studios with access to these new toys deployed them in "big-budget production genres such as the musical, the adventure film, the Western, and the historical epic" because their "narratives were [thought to be] most capable of accommodating and naturalizing the new emphasis on stylization and ostentatious spectacle" (ibid.). For example, Twentieth Century-Fox may have given DeMille its best exemplar of the new technology, but a second CinemaScope camera went to the simultaneous production of *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Jean Negulescu, 1953). Starring Marilyn Monroe, Betty Grable and Lauren Bacall, it was arguably the more popular of the two films in the long run.

In any event, when *The Robe* was "released by 20th Century-Fox … in its production, distribution, and reception" most "attention was paid to its technical virtuosity … The intense spectacle of CinemaScope threatened to eclipse the film's pious religious narrative in celebration of Hollywood's newly enlarged film frame," a point made in *Time* magazine's review (September 28, 1953) (Wyke 1997: 28). We have come full circle to the trick film, where the appeal of new technology outweighs the narrative.

Reclaimed knowledge of early film history calls for an adjusted appreciation of ancient world films in film studies. However, claims for firsts, as must be apparent by now, don't seem important to me, although the search for firsts is. We can never know whether somewhere in all that's lost there might

not be yet another earlier version of one first or another; and, as Solomon points out, people in different locations sometimes simultaneously find similar solutions to similar problems.

There is no question that ancient world films have been commercially successful. "Three of the top five grossing films in Hollywood during the 1950s were epics" (Burgoyne 2008: 38), among them *Hercules*, "a film that earned anywhere from one-eighth to one-third as much as either *Ben-Hur* (1959) or *The Ten Commandments* (1956) yet cost less than 1 percent as much to produce" (Solomon 2001: 15). All three are among the "nine films about the ancient world [that] used to rank among the top money earners of all time" (33). Joseph E. Levine's transformation of the Italian *Hercules* into something appropriate for a teenaged American audience also "metamorphosed his $120,000 investment" in marketing "into an overnight fortune" (117). While the genre's marketing was often spoofed for its bombast, this particular campaign was something else yet again.

Some claims for what ancient world films are said to have pioneered just do not seem sustainable. There is no reason to think that the appearance, for example, of feature length films, widescreen technology and CGI is necessarily connected to ancient world subject matter. These and other changes in film production and exhibition were determined by multiple factors, the most important of which in all cases seems to have been financial. Producers want to make films as cheaply as possible; even more importantly, they want to attract audiences to their films. New technology has often been necessary to achieve both goals. Not just ancient world stories, but other stories made familiar through the previous success of novels, plays and other forms of entertainment as well as stories based on contemporary events could also serve the purpose.

It is interesting, as Solomon says, that "'ancient' films seemed to appear whenever the industry underwent a dramatic technical or economic change" (2001: 213), but the examples he gives are debatable. Scale, budget, familiarity: his terms are relative, applicable to other genres and subjects, including those that appeared side by side with the ancient world films. After all, it's Westerns that are most commonly remembered as the widescreen films of the 1950s.

One of the most important "firsts" associated with ancient world films has yet to be mentioned here: the legal case associated with the Kalem-produced *Ben-Hur* (Harry T. Morey, Sidney Olcott and Frank Rose, 1907). The estate of Lew Wallace and Harper Publishing sued for breach of copyright and won, changing film production's treatment of source material forever (Solomon 2001: 203). But it could as easily have been other genre material with vigilant copyright holders.

A somewhat neglected argument for the importance of ancient world films is their role in developing and sustaining special effects departments during the studio era and of independent talents outside the studios before and afterward. And an often forgotten contribution to Hollywood-style production attributable to ancient world films and their need for special effects is the establishment of safety regulations after a fatal accident during the filming of the 1929 *Noah's Ark* (Michael Curtiz). Over cinematographer Hal Mohr's objections—he then quit the job—the "$40,000 dollar special-effects extravaganza" went ahead (Solomon 2001: 139). Some claims for firsts may even be undesirable.

Solomon says that "any serious film watcher risks becoming a hypocrite by uniformly panning the entire 'ancient' genre" (2001: xviii). Sherwood seemed to think that the hypocrisy was inherent in the genre, at least in DeMille's work. American film critic James Agee wrote, "For three decades DeMille's name has been loosely used as shorthand for fustian and splendiferous vulgarity" (1958: 379). Herman Weinberg, another contemporary American film critic, could be snarky about DeMille as well, even while preferring DeMille's *Cleopatra* to Mankiewicz's (1970: 205–206). English critics Penelope Houston, John Gillett and Raymond Durgnat argued that Hollywood's big budgets allowed no risks, leading to ancient world epics characterized by conservative presentations as well as conservative politics (Wyke 1997: 11).

Sadly, "after the film's triumphant opening in 1915," Christie notes, there was "no mention" of *Cabiria* in "early French critical writings on film" (2013: 109). That is not hypocrisy; that is neglect. And the genre deserves better.

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PART IV

THE ANCIENT WORLD AS AN IDEA

CHAPTER NINETEEN

High Art and Low Art Expectations: Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture

Alastair J. L. Blanshard

In Search of the Popular

Defining popular culture is notoriously difficult. While it exists in a resolutely oppositional relationship with "high culture," it also clearly means something more than just the residue of "those texts and practices that fail to meet the required standards" (Storey 2015: 5–6). As Raymond Williams observed (1983: 237; followed by Storey 2015: 5), the term "popular" involves complimentary notions of audience ("well-liked by many people"), intent ("work deliberately setting out to win favor with the people"), quality ("inferior kinds of work") and authorship ("culture actually made by the people for themselves"). Certainly, we can find each one of these aspects, sometimes in conjunction with each other, when we examine the films depicting ancient Greece and their associated para-phenomena. The important element to note is that "popular culture" inevitably must be a capacious category. It includes everything from high cultural products that "go viral" (e.g., the Three Tenors singing "Nessun dorma") to mass market commercial products that deliberately oppose themselves to elitist offerings. In cinematic terms, it embraces everything from big-budget, accessible productions produced with an eye on film awards to the "noisy, garish pulp movies pumped out for the grindhouses at the end of the exhibition chain by the studios'

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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B-divisions and the fly-by-night independent production companies that replaced them … the disposable products of a postwar mass culture" (Stanfield 2011: ix).

Stories and images from antiquity have always proved fertile ground for popular entertainment. It is almost impossible to find a period in history in which the classical world has not played a prominent part in popular culture. From Elizabethan drama onwards, the myths and historical storylines of Rome and Greece have proved irresistible to generations of dramatists. Very few of these works have been the exclusive preserve of elites. They have always appealed to a diverse audience including many members of the lowest socioeconomic classes. For most of its history, the theatre was a "democratic cultural institution where all classes gathered together in a shared yet hierarchic public space" (Malamud 2009: 35).

Film was the heir to this rich tradition, particularly the significant dramatic output that occurred in the nineteenth century of classically flavored entertainment and images. For example, in the United States, we see in the first part of the century, particularly around the 1830s to 1840s, a number of popular stage plays particularly designed to appeal to working-class sentiments. Robert Montgomery Bird's *The Gladiator* (1831) took the figure of Spartacus and turned him into a hero that simultaneously spoke to Americans suffering under the yoke of slavery and the "poor whites" of the South enduring poverty and exploitation by wealthy landowners (Wyke 1997a: 57–60; Malamud 2009: 40–43). The play was tremendously popular, with productions staged right up until the end of the nineteenth century and there is a clear genealogy in the American imagination that links Bird's emancipationist Spartacus with Howard Fast's novel *Spartacus* (1951), the text that formed the basis of Kubrick/Trumbo's *Spartacus* (1960). A similar point could be made about the debt to the nineteenth century when considering the equally successful translations into film of nineteenth-century popular novels such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur* (1880) or Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* (1895).

The ancient world promised not only stirring plotlines: it promised spectacle as well. Again, the groundwork for film was laid down by the popular entertainment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Circus acts and burlesques purported to recreate the entertainment of the Roman Imperial court (Malamud 2001). "Hippodramas" or melodramas staged on horseback recreated scenes from the Trojan cycle. Spectacles such as *Nero, or the Destruction of Rome* staged in Olympia in 1888 promised hyperbolically to the audience that they would be witness to thousands of performers, hundreds of chariots, wild beasts, the combined "gladiatorial contests of the famed Coliseum and Circus Maximus with the Olympic Games of ancient

Greece," "grand, bewitching dances" and "gorgeous scenes of imperial orgies" (Wyke 1997a: 122–123). This rich imagery was symbiotic with more elite forms of art such as history-painting whose canonical canvasses would also find themselves reworked into cinematic scenes. Thus, cinema served to popularize and perpetuate the artistic output of figures such as Jean-Léon Gérôme (whose paintings of the Roman arena became a classic of cinematic *mise-en-scène*) long after Gérôme's own artistic practice had fallen out of favor (Gotlieb 2010).

Such events and images helped to locate antiquity as a place that was entertaining, opulent and, most importantly, accessible to the public. While Greek and Latin remained the province of the "gentleman" (cf., e.g., Harrison 2007), the colorful myths, stories and personalities of classical antiquity were owned by all.

Looking for Greece in Popular Film

Popular cinema readily adapted this classical material. Certain themes and epochs proved more popular than others. Earlier periods of history, particularly the eighteenth century, may have loved the imagery and civic tales of self-sacrifice from the founding of the Roman Republic, but the twentieth-century cinematic audience preferred the moral ambiguities and luxurious excess of Julio-Claudian Rome. Indeed, when assessing cinematic output, the dominance of this period is striking. Rome may have existed for over 1200 years, but as far as cinema is concerned it seems that the only period that matters is the period between the revolts of Spartacus (73 BC) and the eruption of Mount Vesuvius that destroyed Pompeii (AD 79). Even within this period, coverage is not even, with the reign of the Emperor Nero (AD 54–68) dominating.

The absence of Greece from this picture tells us a lot about the dynamics of popular appropriation of Classical culture. It should be observed that it was not a lack of materials to adapt that stymied the cinematic flourishing of Hellenism. As the flyer for *Nero, or the Destruction of Rome* makes clear, the "Olympic Games" were just as much a powerful symbol to conjure with as the "Circus Maximus." Chariot-racing became, thanks to cinema, a synecdoche for Rome, but this association was not inevitable. Chariot-racing is as much a Greek pastime as a Roman one. Arguably, its presence in Book 23 of the *Iliad* gives Greece precedence over Rome.

Certainly, there were some early attempts in cinema at making popular entertainment based on Greek material. In 1905, Georges Méliès turned to Homer's *Odyssey* and produced *L'île de Calypso,* in which Odysseus encounters

seductive maidens and the Cyclops Polyphemus as he stops to rest on an island on his way back from Troy. Méliès started a minor trend in Homeric-themed works that climaxed in the silent epics *The Fall of Troy* (*La caduta di Troia*, Luigi Romano Borgnetto and Giovanni Pastrone, 1911) and the three-hour long German silent film *Helen of Troy* (*Helena*, Manfred Noa, 1924). These were epic films that reworked Homer into something new and decidedly populist. "In the first three decades of cinema 'Homer' not only meant a combination of the monumental, the antiquarian, and the ethical … 'Homer' also embraced trick cinematography, eroticism, fantasy, and on occasion, parody and burlesque" (Michelakis 2013: 150–151). The trend was not limited to just Homer. While no specific text lies behind Louis Feuillade's *Idylle corinthienne* (1909), its storyline of lost and rediscovered love among the slave markets is reminiscent of a number of ancient Greek novels. Just as popular novels set in Rome could inspire film, so too could their Greek equivalents inspire popular cinematic products. John Erskine's best-selling novel *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1925) was turned into a silent film of the same name in 1927 by Alexander Korda. Korda cast his then-wife Maria in the title role. In the film Maria plays "a vain, flirtatious coquette who cares more about her glamorous clothes and appearance than about the Prince of Troy … Hollywood's Helen signifies glamour, indulgence and consumption, and as such she implicitly encourages such behaviors in the consumerist audience" (Malamud 2013: 330). Helen fulfills a role here that only seven years later would be occupied by the figure of Cleopatra as played by Claudette Colbert (Wyke 2002: 293–302).

As these early cinematic products show, Greece could serve many of the same functions as Rome did during Hollywood's Golden Age. It could be a place of compelling narrative, spectacle and consumerist desire. However, films involving Greece never grew to dominate production in the same way that films about Rome did. The silent film interest in Greece did not continue into the period of the "talkies." A variety of explanations have been offered for this phenomenon (cf. Nisbet 2006: 7–44).

Popular culture prefers narratives that lack moral ambiguity. The "good" and the "bad" need to be firmly demarcated. Heroes may be redeemed, but only if the trajectory of that redemption is clear-cut and doesn't falter or involve reversal. In such circumstances, Imperial Rome always had an advantage over Greece owing to the presence of Christianity. Pitting Pagan Rome against a newly emergent Christianity proved to be an irresistible fight. Vampy empresses could be set against demure, young chaste Christian girls. Sadly, Greece lacked such an easily accessible moral compass. Certainly, the Greeks had a strong notion of ethics, but such a framework was alien to mainstream audiences. Part of the attraction operational in films on Rome

was the frisson created by the repressed sexual desire of the Christian female lead for her male (often converted-Pagan) counterpart. In a world without Christian sexual mores, what is holding her back? "If *he* is pagan and likes girls, and if *she* is pagan and likes boys, why don't they spend the whole movie in bed?" (Nisbet 2006: 23). No doubt an ancient Greek father would have had a number of ready answers to this question. However, the problem was that the modern audience didn't know this in the same way that they knew instinctively how a good Christian girl should act.

It was not just problems of ethical accessibility that affected Greece. Greece also suffered because often its key religious, political and cultural institutions were foreign to mainstream audiences as well. The Greek world presented challenges of diversity and foreignness. Geographically, it stretched from the Black Sea to Spain and North Africa. Within this region, hundreds of individual Greek city-states developed their own laws, cultures and political arrangements. Each city had its own unique complicated history. Even within seemingly well-known cities like Athens and Sparta, there were surprises. So, for example, *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) struggled with explaining the Spartan office of Ephor. "The Ephors, priests of the Old Gods. Inbred swine, more creature than man. Creatures who even Leonidas must bribe and beg. No Spartan king has gone to war without the Ephors' blessing" intones the narrator in the film. The explanation is wrong in almost every respect, but one can only sympathize with the film-maker or graphic artist who needs to explain this peculiarly Spartan constitutional arrangement.

Of course, it is not just Greece that suffers from this. Republican Rome also suffered from a similar fate. The complicated politics of Republican Rome have always meant, with the exception of plots derived from Shakespeare, that the period has been less favored by cinema. The political intrigues of figures such as the Gracchi, Marius, Sulla and Pompey never proved conducive to much popular output. Again, lack of ethical clarity played a part. The figures of the late Roman Republic are too morally compromised to translate easily into cinema. The complicated ranks of Roman magistracies also proved impenetrable to popular culture. "What are the legal and administrative competencies of an aedile?" is a question than no cinema audience has had to face.

It is no accident that the few popular historical films set in ancient Greece have featured kings (Alexander, Leonidas, Agamemnon, Priam). Kingship is a concept well established in the cinematic canon. The audience knows what kings can and can't do. The same cannot be said for Theban Beotarchs, Corinthian *epidemiourgoi* or Athenian *thesmothetai*. The complicated and idiosyncratic nature of the Greek political landscape makes historical films a difficult endeavor. The problem is not insurmountable. *The 300 Spartans*

(Rudolph Maté, 1962) solves the problem by having the Council of Greeks deliberate about the ongoing Persian threat in a manner not dissimilar to the United Nations or, perhaps given its Cold War political agenda, a meeting of NATO. Each of the Greek city-states clusters in the Council Room like a modern national delegation. However, while the modeling on the UN provides a useful interpretative frame for understanding the diversity of Greek politics, it has its limits. It doesn't allow you to understand the distinctive nature of each political constitution. The distinction between tyranny, oligarchy and democracy—the foundational triad of Greek constitutional arrangements—remains opaque.

Greece struggled to compete with Rome in terms of *mise-en-scène*. Trapped by a binary in which Greece was equated with "simplicity" while Rome with "opulence," the Greek world was a less obvious place to showcase the set-piece displays of wealth and power that Rome could supply. Rome could offer rich, cosmopolitan cities, settings to which urbanized modern audiences could relate. In contrast, ever since the Romantic period, Greece has become associated with landscapes. The world of Greece was one of countryside vistas and rugged islands. The vision it offered was Arcadian rather than urban. The palette of Rome was lush reds and gleaming gold. Greece instead only provided the blue of the sea and the white of marble. Greece was pretty, rather than striking or compelling.

Hercules and the Power of Myth

However, in one aspect Greece did have an advantage over Rome in the creation of populist works, and that was Greece's ability to offer escapist, fantastic narratives. Much of popular culture is escapist and utopian in theme (Dyer 2002: 20, 25–27). After all, the mass has many more reasons than the elite to wish the world were ordered differently. Popular culture provides an escape from the drudgery of the mundane. It allows its audience to indulge their dreams and fantasies. Dyer (2002: 26) lists five different forms of escapist fantasy that popular culture traditionally indulges in. These are fantasies of abundance, escape from industrialized work, excitement and vitality, political freedom and community. Rome was certainly able to fulfill the desire for abundance through its ability to create scenes of luxury and indulgence. However, it was the myths of Greece that provided the fullest and most varied forms of escapism. Stories of spectacular heroic deeds set in a simplified, rural milieu free from the cares of the modern world and in which evil rulers are overthrown and villagers triumph offer the full range of escapist pleasures.

It is in the field of myth that we can most easily see the continuities between nineteenth-century popular entertainments, their successors in silent film and the development of modern films. One mythic storyline in particular stands out. This is the mythic cycle of stories that attends the hero, Hercules.

The "strongman" figure was a regular feature of nineteenth-century circus entertainment. All too often these individuals adopted classical accouterments to add a certain touch of class to their routines. They co-opted Hercules' most distinctive attribute, the lion skin (often stylized into a leopard skin), as a dominant signifier of the strongman. While stage names such as Hercules, Apollo, Romulus, Remus or Cyclops helped to give a classical pedigree to the entertainers (Wyke 1997b: 53).

Over time there developed an increased fascination in the physiques of these performers. Traditionally strongmen did not have a well-defined musculature. As most "feats of strength" were actually stage illusions, "strongmen" did not actually have to be all that physically strong. Instead, they sought to create the impression of strength through impressive bulk. The traditional strongman was tall, barrel-chested, often running to fat. It was the influence of Greek statuary, especially statues of Heracles that led to a transformation in the body-shape of the strongman and would mark the transition from strongman to body-builder.

Traditionally, the birth of body-building is dated to June 12, 1893 at the Casino Roof-Garden on Broadway in New York. On that date, the audience was exposed to a type of body that they had never seen before. As the curtain went up, the audience got a glimpse of the tremendous muscled physique of Eugen Sandow (born Friedrich Wilhelm Müller). Sandow's act did not consist of any marvels of strength. Instead, covered in plaster dust, he struck a number of poses in imitation of classical statuary. A number of famous works such as the "Dying Gaul" were evoked, but the most famous imitation, and the one that became his trademark, was his imitation of the Farnese Hercules. His identification with the hero becoming so strong that in May 1894 he even reprised Hercules' first labor and wrestled a lion in San Francisco, admittedly a lion muzzled and wearing leather mittens (Blanshard 2005: 151–156).

Sandow created the "Herculean" look in the popular imagination. There had been earlier figures that had produced shows very similar to Sandow's. For example, in 1828, Andrew Ducrow had performed an act entitled "The Living Statue or Model of Antiques" which had involved Ducrow assuming various poses including several that imitated Hercules battling the Nemean Lion (Wyke 1997b: 53–54).

Yet, while we can find precursors for Sandow, none can explain his extraordinary success. Within the space of a few short years, Sandow's body became

one of the most famous bodies in the world. He was invited to West Point to show off his muscles to the cadets. He toured the world giving demonstrations of his classical poses. The British Museum even commissioned a plaster cast of him to represent the ideal Caucasian type for an exhibition on all the major races of the world (Chapman 1994: 119–121). He existed in multiple formats. Sandow wrote books and published magazines on physical development. Photographs of him striking his various poses circulated widely. He even appeared in primitive film. In 1894, he visited Thomas Edison in his studio in New Jersey and a short Kinetoscope film of Sandow flexing was produced for distribution in "Kinetoscopic Parlors" throughout the country. This was the first time that Hercules became a mass media phenomenon.

Sandow inspired numerous imitators and it was not long before there were dozens of young Hercules snapping at the heels of Sandow and wanting to steal his lion-skin mantle. This was a world-wide phenomenon. Originally from Germany, Sandow had devoted followers in Great Britain, France, Canada, Australia and the United States. The fashion for displays of muscular poses in imitation of statuary proved to be so popular that in September 1901 in the Royal Albert Hall the world's first body-building competition was staged. Most importantly, body-building culture found a home in Italy where it grafted onto the local tradition of the muscleman (*il forzuto*). While Sandow can claim the title of being the first body-builder on film, the first body-building movie star was Bartolomeo Pagano.

The Italian director Giovanni Pastrone had discovered Pagano in 1914 working as a stevedore in Genoa. When Pastrone cast Pagano in the role of the muscular slave "Maciste" in the film *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914), he was operating in line with a distinct trend. Classical strongmen were proving to be popular in films. In 1913, the strongman Bruto Castellani had appeared as the gentle giant Ursus in *Quo Vadis?* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1913) and the muscular Mario Guaita-Ausonia had taken the lead role in *Spartaco, il gladiatore della Tracia* (Giovanni Enrico Vidali, 1913). While *Spartaco* had proven to be a break-out role for Guaita-Ausonia and brought him to international attention, it was Pagano's role as Maciste in the world-wide phenomenon of *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914) that was to establish Italy as the home of the body-builder hero and classical antiquity as the most obvious location in which to stage his body.

Cabiria is set in Italy and Carthage and the plot revolves around the adventures of an abducted young Italian girl who is taken to Carthage, but is eventually rescued by the Roman spy Fulvius Axilla and his slave companion Maciste. The setting is Roman, during the time of Hannibal and the war with Carthage, but the influence of Greece is felt. The presence of the animal skin tunic in Maciste's costume is meant to directly allude to the Greek hero

Hercules, while his name, Maciste, according to the film's scriptwriter, the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, was supposedly derived from one of the cult attributes of Heracles.

It is hard to overstate the importance of *Cabiria*. It broke numerous conventions and previous limitations in film-making. It pioneered "on-location" filming as well as artificial lighting effects for interior scenes. Its use of the dolly (which Pastrone developed for this film) and horizontal panning gave this film a sense of three-dimensional space that earlier films lacked. The critical response was universally positive. Following its release in Turin and Milan in 1914, the film traveled the world. In New York it was hailed as the "greatest picture in memory" (Solomon 2001: 48). The film's popularity and reputation ensured that it could even be rereleased in the United States in 1929, fifteen years after its initial production. Significantly, for the study of popular culture, it established a transnational vernacular about the "look and feel" of popular antiquity. It introduced key elements that could be exploited by later productions. It would be an overstatement to say that every popular film set in antiquity remakes *Cabiria*, but it would not be an exaggeration to say that every popular film for the next six decades played with a grammar and syntax for cinematic expression established in *Cabiria*.

The Rise of Peplum Cinema

The success of Pagano in the role of the muscular slave in *Cabiria* has caused this film to be often described as the "first peplum," the affectionately derogatory term coined by French film critics to describe the explosion of muscleman film in the 1960s and derived from the extremely short tunics worn by the lead actors. Certainly *Cabiria* started a trend for Italian muscleman epics. Pagano would go on to star in a number of other Maciste films, not all of them set in the ancient world. He also enjoyed a lucrative career in Germany where he starred in five films, effectively restarting the high-action German genre of *Sensationfilm* (Dall'Asta and Bertellini 2000: 304). From Europe to Mexico (*Maciste turista*, Santiago Sierra, 1918) to the United States where Douglas Fairbanks was described as "the American Maciste," Pagano created an appetite for the cinematic exploits of heroes that were unafraid to show their muscles.

However, designating *Cabiria* as the first peplum or the "father of peplum" has a tendency to erase a number of important developments in the years between *Cabiria* and the explosion of peplum films in the 1960s. The path from Bartolomeo Pagano to Steve Reeves is not direct. There were a number of important intervening events. Importantly, these events caused

the muscleman figure to once again re-orientate himself more directly towards the figure of Hercules and give these muscleman epics a distinctly Greek flavor, especially in the first generation of peplum.

One of the most important events was the desire in the post-war period to create an Italian cinema that was visually and politically distinct from the cinema of the Fascist period. Mussolini's government had been assiduous in co-opting for itself the imagery and iconography of ancient Rome. They had sponsored the production of nationalist films set in antiquity such as *Scipio Africanus* (Carmine Gallone, 1937; Landy 1986: 194–200). Seen through this lens, films such as *Maciste* seemed worryingly nationalistic, especially given the fact that its script had been written by Gabriele D'Annunzio, a figure lionized by a large number of Fascists and who had received a state funeral under Mussolini when he died in 1938.

The second important trend had been a decline in the popularity of body-building since the early part of the twentieth century. Once seen as fabulous and aspirational, the physiques of body-builders had come increasingly into question. Familiarity had bred contempt. It was unclear what these bodies were being developed for. Unlike the bodies of athletes, the bodies of body-builders served no purpose. They looked narcissistic at best, at worst positively unwholesome. The open display of flesh gave the sport a risqué, sexualized air. The rise of "beefcake" magazines that showed off muscled bodies in tableaux designed to excite the desire of its gay readership served to eroticize the body-builder and these publications were subject to a number of prosecutions for obscenity. Burlesque shows such as the Mae West Revue, which combined a line-up of America's leading body-builders with West's saucy dialogue and love of double entendre, didn't help matters (Nisbet 2006: 48–49).

The third element that had changed was the environment for the production, dissemination and viewing of films. From 1927 to 1948, film production and dissemination had been dominated by the large Hollywood studios that effectively controlled film distribution in the United States. The films they produced were large budget affairs and the viewing experience was often lavish. Independent producers might be able to produce B-movies to be shown in conjunction with these premier films, but even then distribution was often difficult. Major studios could demand that theaters purchase all their films in order to gain access to their products, effectively forcing them to buy "blind." Independent B-companies had to negotiate on much less favorable terms.

The 1948 anti-trust case brought by the US government against Paramount Pictures effectively ended the studio domination of the distribution of films (Conant 1960: 91–153). The Supreme Court decided that the studios could

no longer enter into exclusive distribution arrangements or force theaters to "blind buy." This meant that there was much greater freedom for theaters in showing films and producers and agents could now act as important intermediaries for film distribution. It also meant that European films, which were cheap to make and enjoyed significant tax advantages, could compete more vigorously with American-made films (Wagstaff 1998).

The nature of the theater had changed as well. Theaters became less prestigious venues. A new kind of theater emerged, the drive-in. While drive-in theaters had been known as far back as 1914, the drive-in theater did not properly emerge until 1933. They reached their peak in the 1950s and continued in popularity well into the 1960s (Segrave 2006). The drive-in offered a totally different type of viewing experience to the dark, plush, velvet-curtained interiors of premiere movie houses. Instead, the environment was noisy, chaotic, likely to be interrupted, the sound quality was poor and the vision of the film often obscured by the windscreen or the roofs of other cars. It favored a very different kind of cinema, one where continuous action and simple plots outweighed subtle acting or complex narrative.

All these elements—the effect of the war, changes in attitude to the body and the structure of film distribution—are worth stressing because they are useful reminders that while popular culture has certain formal qualities, it is also bound by historical circumstance. Out of this particular confluence of events emerged one man who was able to take advantage of these conditions to act as the catalyst for a new type of film, the peplum. That man was the promoter Joseph E. Levine, and included in his lasting legacy would be the introduction and runaway success of the Italian Hercules epic starring Steve Reeves, *Hercules* (1958).

Joseph Levine's success with *Hercules* came relatively late in his career. He was fifty-four when *Hercules* was released. Initially a small-time promoter in the New England area, Levine had gradually honed his talent for spotting popular entertainment. In 1956, he had been instrumental in bringing the Japanese science-fiction film *Godzilla* into the American market. *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (Ishiro Honda and Terry Morse, 1956) was the perfect film for the new world of young, cashed-up, drive-in viewers. "Dynamic Violence!, Savage Action!, Spectacular Thrills!" promised the publicity campaign. The pace was fast, the narrative slight, and special effects were cheap, but the audience didn't seem to mind. The film is useful for showing the tolerance of drive-in audiences for problems in continuity and editing. To make *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* editors cut-in sequences involving the Canadian actor Raymond Burr into a pre-existing Japanese film and then redubbed some parts of the Japanese dialogue into English. To modern eyes, it is a pretty brutal confection, but contemporary audiences were happy to

forgive its faults. These were editing faults that would be shared by a large number of peplum films in the following decade.

Levine was also well connected with film studios in Italy. Initially, this had involved the distribution of high-end neo-realist dramas such as *Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) and the *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948). However, Levine's taste was quite Catholic. In 1954, he had great success importing the much more populist Italian film *Attila* (Pietro Francisci, 1954). This film was directed by Pietro Francisci and starred Antony Quinn and Sophia Loren. It was set in the final days of the Roman Empire and told the story of Attila's victorious attack on Rome and his defeat of the forces of Valentinian III. The film did extremely well at the box office and again confirms Levine's talent for knowing what the American popular audience wanted. Previous promoters had declared the film "a dog" and wanted nothing to do with it (Parsons, "If a movie's a 'dog', Joe Levine makes it a mint," *Washington Post*, September 20, 1959: H4).

Given his track record and previous associations, Levine was the obvious person to approach about the US distribution rights for Francisci's 1958 film *Le fatiche di Ercole* ("The Labors of Hercules"). Unlike *Attila*, which enjoyed the presence of bankable stars, this film brought together two relatively unknown actors (although both would go on to have very profitable careers), the body-builder Steve Reeves and the Yugoslav-born actress Sylva Koscina. Reeves was a significant figure within the US body-building community. He had won the titles of Mr. America in 1947, Mr. World in 1948 and Mr. Universe in 1950. However, outside these circles, his name had little public recognition. Yet, despite the obscurity of the stars, Levine was certain of the success of this film. It had everything you needed for a smash hit: "It had musclemen, broads and a shipwreck and a dragon for the kids," he told reporters.

The Mythic Recipe for Popular Success

In his description of the attractions that *Hercules* offered to a cinema audience, Levine illustrates why the myths of Greece lend themselves to successful translation into popular entertainments. In their ability to be manipulated into stories of aspirational heroism and questing adventure, Greek myths provide a blueprint for successful wide-appeal cinema. Of course, not every myth is so easily translated. Indeed, the idea of a family-friendly Greek myth is almost an oxymoron. Still those that have made the transition have traditionally done well at the box office.

Central to escapist fantasy is the notion of the hero, a figure who can overcome seemingly overwhelming odds and still emerge triumphant. In a world of endless, inescapable problems, he (and it is almost always a "he") provides a satisfying tonic. He is a figure onto which we can project our hopes and dreams, and for just a moment see ourselves in him. For this reason, he needs to be human. One might think this causes problems for the adaption of heroes based on Greek myth. After all, one of the defining features of the ancient hero is that they are different to moral men. *Hercules* faces up to this problem head-on. In one of the early scenes, Hercules renounces his immortality and begs the Gods through the Delphic Oracle to make him human. The gods oblige, washing away his godhead in a mystical rainstorm. "Now you shall have to confront your future using only your own forces. Mortal victories where you can be defeated. Now you can kill and be killed by others since you are no longer a god … Hercules is a man now and the Gods will punish you for your stubbornness" intones the Oracle. Making Hercules human is a narrative strategy employed time and again in films about the hero. Disney's *Hercules* has the hero as a baby drink a magic potion that renders him mortal. In *Hercules* (Brett Ratner, 2014), the film explains that far from being a hero, Hercules is just a mortal man about whom outlandish tales of his semi-divinity have been told.

While making him human, the films did permit Hercules to be the best that a human could be. Such a treatment harmonized with the mythology that infused body-building culture. Few figures are as emblematic of the power of aspiration as the body-builder. Hercules's heroic body isn't the result of wealth or intelligence, but simple devotion, willpower and training. From the time of the famous Charles Atlas advertisements that promised, "In seven days I can make you a new man," body-building has always perpetuated the myth that anybody can have the body of Hercules. In this Hercules was set against his opponents who relied on supernatural or artificial means to defeat their enemies and impose their rule on their opponents. From political machinations (*Hercules*, Pietro Francisci, 1958), to the use of magic (*Hercules Unchained*, Pietro Francisci, 1959), to the deployment of drugs (*Hercules and the Captive Women*, Vittorio Cottafavi, 1961) or even the construction of elaborate machines (*Hercules Against the Moon Men*, Giacomo Gentilomo, 1964), Hercules's enemies never fight fair.

Complementing Hercules's human status are his working-class associations. From the beginning of body-building epics, Hercules and his associates have always been identified with the rural poor. Maciste was a slave and Hercules, for all his divine parentage, often seems little better in social status. The heroes of mythic cinema never lead luxurious lives. They earn their pay through the sweat of their brow. They always appear uncomfortable in palaces.

The focus on their bodies underlines this association. Yet, their appeal in not just limited to the working man. In an industrialized age, it is easy to understand nostalgia for a time and place when one did not need to rely on machines to achieve one's aims, but could settle matters by the flexing of one's muscles. In his discussion of the appeal of fairy stories, J. R. R. Tolkien remarked that "Many stories out of the past have only become 'escapist' in their appeal through surviving from a time when men were as a rule delighted with the work of their hands into our time, when many men feel disgust with man-made things" (Tolkien 1983: 151). The same observation could equally apply to the appeal of Greek myth. When Hercules smashes the contraptions of his enemies or undoes their complicated plans he strikes a blow for a more humble, simpler, less complicated life.

His emotional inner life was simplified as well. In Greek myth, Hercules's relationship with women was complicated and often violent. In film, matters were much more straightforward. Like many other popular cinematic genres, the romantic sub-plot of peplum films was highly schematized. Women came in two sorts: the cunning, oversexed vamp and the demure virgin who was always in need of saving. Hercules might flirt with the first, but his heart always belonged to the second. The films almost always ended with Hercules and his girl riding or sailing off into the sunset.

The 1960s peplum films were coy in showing any overt sexual activity. That said, they were certainly not afraid of offering up both male and female bodies for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience. The skimpiness of Hercules's costume was matched (but rarely exceeded) by those of both the female vamp and her harem of female associates. One of the standard features of the peplum film was a dance sequence in which women would perform for the delight of a male audience (and the cinema goer as well). These dances often took an Orientalizing turn, climaxing with the women writhing on the floor in ecstasy.

In keeping with contemporary standards, modern versions of the Hercules myth such as *Hercules* (Brett Ratner, 2014) and *The Legend of Hercules* (Renny Harlin, 2014) have been more overt in their portrayal of the love interests of their hero. However, even here the desire to appeal to as broad an audience as possible has meant that both films kept within the bounds of a PG-13 rating which, while cautioning that some material may be unsuitable for under-teenage children, does not allow extended nudity or explicit content. *Hercules* (2014) was also prepared to have the hero more tortured by guilt and self-doubt. In this, it reflected a trend for darker heroes, most notably exemplified by Christopher Nolan's series of Batman films (*Batman Begins*, 2005; *The Dark Knight*, 2008; *The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012). However, the pattern is not universal, with Kellan Lutz in the *The Legend of*

Hercules sharing none of the mental anguish that Dwayne Johnson exhibited in his portrayal of the hero.

The final ingredient that these adaptations of Greek myth offered was spectacular adventure coupled with astonishing special effects. *Hercules* (1958) offered its audience a troop of savage Neanderthal ape-men and a towering serpent (vaguely reminiscent of Godzilla). However, the film that really managed to capitalize on the facility to produce monstrous spectacle was *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963), a film version of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. The film was directed by Don Chaffey and starred Todd Armstrong as Jason. However, the figure that is most remembered for his association with the film was the virtuoso animator Ray Harryhausen.

It was Harryhausen's ability to bring the fantastic creatures of Greek myth to life that ensured the success of this film. Using his patented Dynamation system, Harryhausen was able to blend stop-motion animated figures with live-action footage, giving his figures a credibility and vitality previously unseen. Harryhausen worked on a number of projects, including sci-fi and horror films (*It Came from Beneath the Sea*, Robert Gordon, 1955; *Earth vs. The Flying Saucers*, Fred F. Sears, 1956; *20 Millions Miles to Earth*, Nathan Juran, 1957). However, it was the world of Greek myth that he found most stimulating as an animator. He loved this "vivid world of adventures with wonderful heroes, villains, and most importantly, lots of fantastic creatures" (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003: 151). The lure of Greek myths was such that Harryhausen even used Greek monsters for tales not set in ancient Greece. In *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (Nathan Juran, 1958), Harryhausen pitted Sinbad against a giant Cyclops and multi-armed snake woman reminiscent of a version of Medusa that he created for *Clash of the Titans* (Desmond Davis, 1981).

Clash of the Titans (1981) continued Harryhausen's interest in the world of Greek myth. The film pits Perseus (Harry Hamlin) against a plethora of mythological monsters including Calibos, a villainous satyr, a two-headed dog, the winged-horse Pegasus, the Stygian Witches, Medusa and the sea-monster sent to eat Andromeda (here given the Norwegian name of "the Kraken"). Once again it was the special effects rather than the quality of the acting that drew critics' attention. "So many things are able to fly in this film that there are times when air traffic over Joppa, Andromeda's hometown, looks like Kennedy Airport's," complained the leading reviewer Vincent Canby (*New York Times*, Jun 12, 1981: C6). Kevin Thomas in the *Los Angeles Times* took a similar view praising Harryhausen's "magical menagerie … and just about the scariest Medusa ever," but lamenting the lack of forceful direction ("Special Effects Sparkle in 'Clash of the Titans'", *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 1981: H1).

Clash of the Titans demonstrates that the ability to create escapist fantasy will always prove popular even when plot and acting are critical failures. It also demonstrates the way in which popular notions of Greek myth are dependent on the technology of film production. These fantasy films are extremely responsive to technological innovation. It is no accident that the remake of *Clash of the Titans* in 2010 was designed to take advantage of the tremendous advances in CGI and its release was postponed so that it could take advantage of new developments in 3D moviemaking. We see a similar love affair with special effects in *Immortals* (2011), a film about Theseus, where the director Tarsem Singh used CGI, 3D effects and a hyper-real color palette to give this mythic story the look and feel of a Renaissance painting.

The Bigger Picture

One of the key tendencies of popular culture is its habit of transcending genres. Films are spun-off into sequels, novels, comic books and television series. A wide range of associated merchandise reaffirms the position of the film and its themes in the public consciousness. Fans idolize and perpetuate the film through authorized and unauthorized means; repacking characters on badges, t-shirts, video spoofs and in fan fiction. In order to understand the films depicting ancient Greece, it is important to understand this "bigger" picture.

Sometimes the para-phenomena that exist alongside a film are directly controlled and produced by the film promoters themselves. This was certainly the case in the wide range of promotional products associated with *Hercules* (1958). Levine was a master of saturation advertising. Levine claimed that there had never been a promotional campaign as expensive or as extensive as the one that he waged for *Hercules.* As always with Levine, one needs to be skeptical about the claims that he makes and one should be cautious about his over-promotion of the promotion campaign. Nevertheless, the campaign was certainly extensive. Billboards, press advertising, opulent publicity parties and street parades featuring a giant cutout of Reeves ensured that nobody could remain ignorant of the film or its star. Customers could buy Hercules-themed merchandise at Macy's. Under license, Dell comics produced a tie-in comic.

We saw a similar situation occurring with the release of the Disney *Hercules* film. Few companies can match Disney for their ability to produce an integrated cross-promotional package for their cinematic products. In addition to being a film producer, it also controls an extensive network of television

stations and cable networks. Its publishing division is the world's largest producer of children's books and magazines. It operates five Disney-branded theme parks and a cruise line. As a result, Disney's *Hercules* was found not just on the big screen, but in an animated TV series that ran on ABC, a Disney-owned television station, for over a year after the release of the film. The television series continued the jokey, ironic take on Greek mythology perpetuated in the film and told of the adventures of the young Hercules during his time at high school in ancient Greece and featured his friends Icarus (voiced by French Stewart), a crazed young man who brains had been fried from "flying too close to the sun," and Cassandra, an anti-social girl whose predictions of doom are always ignored. There were also numerous costumes, books and other merchandise for children to purchase. On the film's release, there was even a Hercules-themed promotion at McDonald's restaurants.

However, once a product enters the cultural sphere, it can be difficult to control, especially when the product belongs in the public domain like Greek myths. A good example of the type of independent spin-off that can occur is the Trans-Lux television cartoon series, *The Mighty Hercules*, which ran for 128 episodes over three years from 1963. Although not specifically tied to any film release, the cartoon series was designed to capitalize on the popularity of the figure of Hercules in peplum cinema. The hero is clearly modeled on the contemporary body-builders and the cartoon takes a similar interest in showing off his animated body to maximum effect ("softness in his eyes, iron in his thighs" sings the opening theme tune).

Some genres lend themselves to film adaption more easily than others. The long association between film and comic books is understandable. Every film starts out life as a series of "storyboards," essentially a comic for the director and his production team. Turning a film into a comic book is almost like reversing the process of film-making. Recently, there has been an increasing convergence of comic book and film production. Marvel, previously only a producer of comic books, now owns a film studio tasked with the job of transforming its comic-book heroes into successful film franchises. The comic-book-into-film phenomenon includes examples of ancient Greek myth and mythologizing. The film *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) translated Frank Miller's highly stylized comic book version of the Battle of Thermopylae into an almost shot-for-shot film starring Gerard Butler as Leonidas. Its overly dramatic style and numerous catchphrases ("This is SPARTA!") spawned a large number of parodies, most notably *Meet the Spartans* (Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer, 2008), a spoof film that mocked *300* for its violence and repressed homoeroticism. The internet helped disperse *300* into the popular sphere with *300* being the subject of copious internet memes. *300* was

followed by a sequel *300: Rise of an Empire* (Noam Murro, 2014) which told the tale of the defeat of Xerxes by the forces of Themistocles. This film was also based on a comic book, Frank Miller's *Xerxes*. Another translation from comic book to film is *Hercules* (Brett Ratner, 2014), which was based on *Hercules: The Thracian Wars*, a graphic novel produced for Radical Comics by Steve Moore and Cris Bolsin.

It is a mistake to regard popular culture as an ephemeral phenomenon. Popular culture is often faddish, but those fads linger long in the memory. Despite the gap of over five decades in film production, reviewers of *Hercules* (2014) made frequent comparisons between it and *Hercules* (1958). The star of the film, Dwayne Johnson was also repeatedly asked how he saw himself in relation to Steve Reeves. The peplum tradition proved impossible to avoid. It dominates the Hercules myth. So, for example, the NBC-Universal television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* acknowledged the peplum tradition through its casting of the unknown, but well-muscled Kevin Sorbo in the lead role. Filmed in New Zealand, the series confirmed the associations between Greece and the rural, primeval landscape. The series ran from 1995 until 1999 and lasted six seasons, comprising 111 episodes. Like the peplum films, the television series took a loose approach to Greek mythology, freely adapting myths and storylines and regularly interjecting anachronistic features. Thematically, the series also showed the same fixation with freedom that is found in peplum films, with a standard plot involving Hercules arriving at a place only to discover that it suffers from some form of oppression (at the hands of gods, man or monsters) and then freeing the inhabitants from that oppression. In keeping with the rhizomatic nature of much popular culture, *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* spawned its own companion television shows, *The Young Hercules* and the highly successful *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Like *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, *Xena: Warrior Princess* was filmed in New Zealand and ran for six seasons and 134 episodes. It enjoyed tremendous cult success and there were numerous tie-in products including toys, fanzines, comic books and video games. The series confirms just how fertile even the loosest classical settings are for popular entertainments.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

"Soft" Science Fiction and Technical Fantasy: The Ancient World in *Star Trek*, *Babylon 5*, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Dr Who*

Otta Wenskus

Preliminary Remarks

As I have explained in some of my previous publications, there is a huge difference between science fiction/technical fantasy on TV and in the cinema: there are far fewer classical references on the big screen than on the small, especially explicit verbal ones, and this has nothing to do with the narrative universes in question since this statement applies to the *Star Trek* series. There are hardly any references to classical antiquity in the films, with the partial exception of *Star Trek* X: *Nemesis* (for which see Wenskus 2009: 212–215), but quite a number in the series (though by no means in every episode). This is for two reasons. First, the TV shows, especially before CGI, afforded less scope for spectacular special effects and, hence, for long drawn-out action scenes, but contained more dialogue. Second, authors of TV series or films are generally wary of springing a constant stream of classical references on an unsuspecting audience. Once a TV audience is hooked, however, you can decide to educate them a bit and/or turn to classical antiquity when you

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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have run out of ideas. When it comes to the cinema, you would have to start more or less from scratch with every new film (Wenskus 2011c: 167). *Star Wars* is no exception to the rule, especially as the Hero's Journey, the model constructed by Joseph Campbell and used by George Lucas, isn't helpful at all when it comes to classical antiquity (Del Chrol 2014). Scenes based on popular reception of classical antiquity, e.g. the pod race in Episode One: "The Phantom Menace," modelled as it is (more or less) on a Roman chariot race (Korenjak 2004), are action-based and can be enjoyed even by those who have never watched any of the *Ben-Hur* films.

My corpus, therefore, consists almost entirely of TV shows: all the canonical *Star Trek* series (*The Original Series* = TOS, 1966–1969; *The Next Generation* = TNG, 1987–1994; *Deep Space Nine* = DSN, 1993–1999, *Voyager* = VOY, 1995–2001, *Enterprise* = ENT, 2001–2005) *Babylon 5* (B 5, 1994–1998) and its spin off *Crusade* (1999), the reboot of *Battlestar Galactica* (BSG, 2003–2009) and the new *Dr Who* series (starting 2005; note that when I write *Dr Who* without qualification I always mean the new series) including some of the spin-offs (*The Sarah Jane Adventures*, 2008–2009, and the first season of *Torchwood*, 2006–2007). In addition, notice is taken of *Star Trek* films (*Star Trek* I to *Star Trek* XI). None of those shows qualifies as "hard" science fiction, not even B 5, in spite of the fact that the station in question is an O'Neill cylinder and would actually work. In "soft" SF, everything technical is more or less taken for granted, unless there is a malfunction invented by the authors for narrative purposes (many *Star Trek* episodes wouldn't even get off the ground if, for example, the holodeck was more reliable). The so called "technobabble" of *Star Trek* is aptly named and almost completely absent from B 5, let alone BSG. *Dr Who* contains even less science (natural or otherwise) and might more accurately be termed "technical fantasy", as might some or indeed most of *Star Trek*, while Ronald D. Moore, probably the most important author of BSG, who is also a *Star Trek* author, aims at realism. I am aware that my criteria are not really satisfactory, but there is no universally valid definition of SF (see, e.g., Keen 2015). I chose these shows because a) I actually enjoyed watching them, with the exception of *Torchwood*, and b) their impact factor ranges from fairly high (B 5) to extremely high (*Star Trek*), not only in the English-speaking world but also in my native Germany where *Star Trek* was a huge success. By contrast, hardly any of us had even heard about *Dr Who* before the new series was available on DVD. I also mention the *Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008–2009) in spite of their relatively low impact factor, but not my favorite SF series of all, *Firefly* (2002), because the question whether this show actually uses classical pretexts is moot, well worth discussing but not in a short overview.

Before I get started, let me define my idea of authorship. When speaking of authors in this context, I am thinking of a collective including everybody who has contributed to the overall canonical text. This includes, among others, producers, scriptwriters, costume designers, actors and actresses (there is quite a lot of ad-libbing in long-running shows) and some, if not all, fans: one must at least consider the fans who point out mistakes and/or whose views influence a large part of the overall audience (Wenskus 2009: 15–21; 2011a). But for each show, the authors must achieve a certain consensus, not only concerning the overall character of the show, its plots, sub-plots and story arcs, but also its philosophy and ideology, including the attitude to classical and Mesopotamian literature. This consensus is open to modifications. For example, after the death of *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry in 1991, the authors of the *Star Trek* spin-offs, particularly *Deep Space Nine*, deconstructed the rather naive pacifism of the original series. But they went about it very slowly, so *Star Trek*'s character was relatively stable. While *Deep Space 9* is considerably darker than the Original Series, it still contains several predominantly funny episodes, as does, to a lesser extent, B 5. The tone of B 5 is even more stable, for a simple reason: Joseph Michael Straczynski, the creator of B 5, wrote most of the scripts himself (92 of a total of 110, including the whole season III, a percentage which is highly unusual) plus the pilot, most of *Crusade*, four TV movies and one direct to DVD movie, thus allowing his co-authors far less latitude than *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry did (Wenskus 2014). This has some peculiar side effects. Granted, *Star Trek* and B 5 share some actors and authors, even in the narrower sense of script writers and/or novelists, e.g. David Gerrold, the inventor of the Tribbles, and, more to the point, Roddenberry's former secretary Dorothy Fontana, who more or less invented the Romulans. However, Gerrold only wrote one B5 episode ("Believers"), Fontana three ("The War Prayer," "Legacies" and "A Distant Star"), so there really isn't that much overlap. As regards the authorial attitude of the authors towards Mesopotamian and classical antiquity, the influence of the shows' creators seems to dominate: *Star Trek*'s Gene Roddenberry (an ex-air force and civilian pilot who took university courses but never graduated) considered himself a secular humanist, while B 5's Straczynski, who majored in psychology and sociology and minored in philosophy and literature, sometimes flaunts a positively aggressive anti-intellectualism, an attitude echoed by the actors in the running commentary to "Falling Towards Apotheosis" (IV/4, 1996). Of course both Roddenberry's and Straczynski's self-portraits have to be taken with more than just a pinch of salt, and Straczynski does acknowledge his debt to classical antiquity, not only by allowing his co-authors to make noble characters mention or even quote Greek authors (Wenskus 2014) but by explaining

(running commentary to III/10, "Severed Dreams," 1996) some of the names of his starships: "You look for historical names, to give things some measure of weight, and not just, you know, personal names." This is better than nothing, but the authors of the *Star Trek* spin-offs, although they are almost completely ignorant about the aims and methods of late twentieth-century archeology (Russell 2002; Wenskus 2009: 11–14), consider archeology an important tool for understanding human and humanoid culture. However, the archeologists of B 5, its short-lived spin-off *Crusade* and the B 5 movie *Thirdspace*, are typical B-movie archeologists, foolish and/or mercenary, allowing ancient evil into our galaxy (the Cthulhu-type *Thirdspace* aliens) or awakening it and becoming one of its associates, as Mr. Morden and Anna Sheridan do in the main story arc of B 5.

Not so the authors of *Star Trek*. While their knowledge of classical antiquity is often superficial and has even inspired some quite embarrassingly bad episodes, especially in the Original Series, I have argued that this knowledge has contributed to the overall quality of *Star Trek*, especially its spin-offs *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager* and, albeit to a lesser extent, the prequel *Enterprise* (Wenskus 2009). On a smaller scale, this also holds good for ancient Mesopotamia, a topic on which Straczynski is woefully ignorant. It wouldn't be a problem if only he knew his limitations.

Mythology, Oracles, and Narrative Structure

First of all, the title of the series *Babylon 5* leads us to expect some influence of Babylonian antiquity. So does the title sequence, showing the eponymous station rotating in space, not only looking like a tilted tower, but also tiled in shades of blue reminiscent of the blue glazes used for the bricks of the Ishtar Gate (now in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin). The Berlin Ishtar Gate is actually a reconstruction on a somewhat smaller scale, but it incorporates the original material excavated by Robert Koldewey. But are we meant to think of ancient Babylon while watching B 5 rotate? Strangely enough, none of the characters in the show ever gives an answer to or even asks the question: why is Babylon 5 called Babylon 5? The number 5 is explained but the Babylon part isn't (not even by Straczynski 1995). For that, we have to turn to the bonus material to "Chrysalis" (I/22, 1994), where Straczynski gives a wildly misleading account of the supposed roles of chaos and order in Babylonian cosmogony. He is even more specific in the bonus material feature "Fireside Chats" that accompanies the direct-to-DVD-film *Lost Tales* (2007). "Ancient Babylon was a point of intersection for a lot of ancient cultures." So far, so good, but most of the rest is plain wrong, including the following statement

which I quote and discuss not only because of the impact of ancient Eastern mythology on, for instance, Hesiod's *Theogony* but because it shows how authors like Straczynski tend to rely on more or less garbled accounts of ancient texts as provided in the mythology courses taught in the United States:

> In addition to that, we had Babylonian creation myth which stipulated that the universe was created through the intercession with the balance between order and chaos. And that, of course, was the very nature of the Vorlon–Shadow conflict. And those who really want to sort of peek ahead to what the conflict was could easily have gone back to early Babylonian creation myth. And what we did on B 5 – you can see it parallels with what was done in Babylonian creation myth.

So what Straczynski claims is that "the" Babylonian creation myth (and we have to use this expression in a very loose sense) is nothing less than a so-called isomorphic template for the B 5 story arc of seasons I to IV. Well, it isn't, not by a long shot. There is no Babylonian text, including the *Enuma elish*, which would have allowed us to extrapolate any of the events of B 5. The *Enuma elish*, so named after its first two words ("when on high"), relates how the young god Marduk rose to power by slaying his mother Tiamat, primordial goddess of the ocean, and established order. Compare the B 5 myth: The so-called First Ones put two highly developed races of energy beings, the Vorlons (who embody the principle of order) and their counterparts, the Shadows (who embody the principle of innovation), in charge of the younger races, including us. But both the Vorlons and the Shadows lose their way, each species seeking to oust the other and manipulating the Younger Races, thus causing a series of bloody wars until they are overthrown by an alliance of some of the Younger Races and the last of the First Ones. They then decide to leave our galaxy (IV 6, "Into the Fire," 1997). The alliance is led by the human captain of Babylon 5 and his future wife, the Minbari Delenn. Humanity will subsequently develop into beings of light and leave for a New Earth, as we learn in the flash-forward episode "Deconstruction of Falling Stars" (IV, 1997). So what is Babylonian about that? Absolutely nothing. But it is a very good story and skillfully told: Straczynski first manipulates us into thinking the Shadows are plain evil and much older than the Vorlons, rather like Cthulhu, while the Vorlons are good. Only gradually do we discover both species were originally good and supposed to guide us, and it is only in "Falling Toward Apotheosis" (IV 22, 1996) that we discover that the Vorlons, although Beings of Light, have tentacle-like appendages (Wenskus 2014; note that the Cthulhu are the first aliens with tentacles).

Granted, Babylonian cosmogony has been explained in terms of order and chaos, but the term "chaos" is far more problematic than Straczynski realized (see Wenskus 2014). I strongly advise all those who are not actually fluent in both Sumerian and Babylonian to avoid it altogether when talking about Ancient Mesopotamia. The word "chaos" could and can have a lot of meanings and/or connotations, and sometimes we do not really know which are in play (e.g., in the case of Hesiod's Chaos). While Chaos (or chaos?) in Hesiod's *Theogony* seems to be chaotic only in the sense that it precedes order but doesn't actually do anything except bring forth offspring, the B 5 Shadows actively produce disorder in their quest for progress. Now, the inert Tiamat as represented in the *Enuma elish* is certainly far closer to the Chaos of Hesiod than to the Shadows of B 5. As far as I know, there are no beings in ancient Babylonian mythology which correspond to the Shadows or the Vorlons, and even if we attribute a more active role to Tiamat than the scholarly community is inclined to do, the structures of the two stories are quite different. Marduk and Tiamat do not belong to the same generation (in the *Enuma elish*, Marduk is Tiamat's son), while the Vorlons and the Shadows do. Marduk triumphs over Tiamat, while the Vorlons are scolded by two members of the Younger Races – the human Sheridan and the Minbari Delenn – just as much as the Shadows are, and decide to leave our galaxy. We will return to the Vorlons and their Greek roots later, but my main point is that Straczynski's debt to ancient Mesopotamia, which he acknowledges, is far smaller than he thinks, while his mostly unacknowledged debt to Greek mythology and religion is far greater, though not as considerable as his debt to twentieth-century generic fiction. Straczynski's concept of Chaos as opposed to Order is a case in point: his main source is probably Michael Moorcock rather than the *Warhammer* cosmos (which in turn has been influenced by Moorcock). At any rate, Moorcock himself saw an homage in Straczynski's use of the name Elric in the episode II/3, "The Geometry of Shadows," 1994. As Moorcock (2009) says, quoting Terry Pratchett: "Generic fiction is a big pot – you take some out and, if you're any good, you put some in."

So, as regards Ancient Babylon and B 5, we are basically left with some blue tiles, a meeting place for different cultures, a few pseudo-parallels and some place names (Euphrates sector, Tigris sector). The role of our Babylonian heritage is actually much smaller in B 5 than it is in *Star Trek*. There is no B 5 counterpart to the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "Darmok" (V/22, 1991) with its impressive retelling of the Gilgamesh story (for which see Heilmann and Wenskus 2006), nor is Hammurabi, or any other historical or mythological Babylonian character, mentioned even once (strangely enough the importance of Babylon for the history of astronomy is

mentioned neither in *Star Trek* nor in B5), nor is it ever implied by any of the B 5 authors that knowing the Babylonian and/or Greek myths might be helpful for understanding our own culture or cultures, not to mention alien ones. Straczynski and the other B 5 authors know more about classical antiquity than about ancient Mesopotamia, but, with one or two notable exceptions, there is hardly anything Greek or Roman in B 5 we do not also find in Star Trek, e.g. the Odysseus/Ulysses theme and medical ethics (Wenskus 2014). There are certainly no obvious isomorphs, as opposed to *Star Trek:* VOY whose character becomes more and more odyssean, including the rather disturbing final episode with the wholesale destruction of the Borg mirroring Odysseus's and his son's extreme brutality towards the suitors, at least one of whom is fundamentally decent, and their admittedly rude lovers. Of course, this brutality is usually played down in most modern adaptations of the Odyssey and barely acknowledged by most modern scholars. And we know that this isomorphism is intentional, thanks to an interview with VOY author Jeri Taylor, especially as regards the second half of the series (Wenskus 2011c: 173).

But this does not mean that the authors of VOY don't owe anything to variations of the Odysseus/Ulysses theme, by Cicero, Virgil, Dante, Tennyson (see Wenskus 2009: 105–110) or the authors of the film *Ulisse* (dir. Mario Camerini, 1954). In Camerini's film the Sirens imitate the voices of the wives, lovers, etc. of Odysseus and his companions. This rather good idea combines the Siren motif with another odyssean element: a peculiar, not to say most unconvincing, flashback in *Odyssey* 4.266–289, according to which Helen imitated the voices of the wives of the Greeks waiting inside the Trojan horse. Now, in the VOY episode "Barge of the Dead" (VI/3, 1999) Siren-like beings haunt the Klingon version of hell, and they too imitate the voices of the loved ones of (in this case) the damned who are still in the relative safety of the eponymous barge. This barge and its ferryman, or, indeed, any barge, is absent in the depiction of the Underworld in *Odyssey* 11, but later became standard issue thanks to Virgil (*Aeneid* 6.298–304) and Dante (*Inferno* 3.82–129).

As regards BSG, the most important ancient source text is probably Xenophon's *Anabasis* (L'Allier 2014), although it is hard to say how much of this text the authors (or some of them) actually read. That both Xenophon's army and the last surviving humans of BSG try to return home could be a coincidence, but not the peculiar facts that the Starbuck character (male in the original version, definitely female in our reboot) had a mother called Socrata (Xenophon claims to have been rebuked by Socrates for asking the Oracle of Delphi the wrong question) and is herself called Kara Thrace, echoing Seuthes, King of Thrace, who helped Xenophon during one of the last stages of his

journey (L'Allier 2014). That said, those texts have hardly anything of real importance in common; the interest in ancient Persia shown by Xenophon contrasts starkly with the (justified) xenophobia of BSG's last humans.

Whether and to what extent BSG also presupposes knowledge of Hesiod is far less obvious, since the Pandora motif has acquired a life of its own. Garvey (2014) thinks that BSG, as it were, goes back to the roots with its depiction of a seductive artificial woman, who causes the downfall of humanity by tricking a gullible male; and another artificial woman, who becomes the ancestor (XX) of the next generation of humans. This combines the versions of Hesiod's *Theogony* 570–616 where the unnamed woman becomes the ancestor of all (or conceivably a certain type of) human women and the one from the same author's *Works and Days* 59–105 where Pandora opens, not a box but a jar (scholars differ as to why she does this and what actually happens when she does; I find none of the explanations entirely convincing). However, there are huge differences: while the first Cylons, according to the reboot, if not the original version, were created by humans and then evolved into two different types, one clearly robotic and one almost totally humanoid, in both Hesiodic versions the women in question were created by the god Hephaestus out of earth. Since we do not know how mankind came into being according to Hesiod, Pandora might not be more artificial than the first human. And are we to suppose that, according to Genesis 2:7, humans are artificial? I do not think so. Things grow from earth but not from metal, so the golden maidens Hephaestus built (*Iliad* 18.417–420) are robots (totally harmless ones, by the way, although fully sentient), but Pandora isn't. Far more interesting is Garvey's following parallel: according to the mythology of the BSG humans, there was a time when humans and gods lived together (Garvey 2014: 219), and something similar is probably implied in *Theogony* 535 (but not in the passage quoted by Garvey, since we are not descended from the Golden Race). Garvey's other parallels are either less specific or the result of uncritical over-interpretation. When Hesiod says (*Theogony* 32) that the Muses inspired him to sing "what will be and what was before", he almost certainly did not mean that the future will be like the past, as Garvey thinks (Garvey 2014: 217). Most of all I really find it hard to believe that (some of) the BSG authors actually read the whole of Hesiod's genuine work. In my experience, almost no one does this nowadays, including many classical scholars, while until quite recently the *Anabasis* was very well known in the English-speaking world.

Be this as it may, the reception of the *Odyssey* by Star Trek and of Xenophon's *Anabasis* by BSG, involving as they do whole story arcs, show a far closer familiarity with the classical texts or adaptations of them than e.g. single episodes featuring Greek gods which turn out to be aliens who have visited

Earth (Apollo in "Who mourns for Adonais?", *Star Trek*: TOS II/2, 1967, or the Muse in "The Muse" in Star Trek: DSN IV/21, 1996 or the Gorgon in *The Sarah Jane Adventures* I/2, "The Eye of the Gorgon," 2007—a Gorgon without snakes which have been added, or so we are told, "by those melodramatic Greeks"). It can be suggested that they are even closer than the extremely interesting case of Q in the *Star Trek* spin-offs who starts out being Byronic, which was what actor John De Lancie had aimed at but which also made his character strike classical poses, and becomes more and more like Hermes, particularly in TNG (Wenskus 2009: 148–166). Returning to B 5, the Shadows are convinced that a civilization can only evolve through strife and thus foster military conflict. This may or may not be an echo of Heraclitus or Empedocles, but we are on somewhat firmer ground with the Vorlons. Whether Straczynski fully realized it or not, they owe much to the Apollo of Delphi: in his commentary on "In the Shadow of Z'ha'dum" (II/17, 1996), Straczynski explicitly acknowledges the influence of Greek tragedy: "In Greek tragedy you set up the prophecy. You know, don't do this because *X* will follow." While the Vorlons are not gods, they are beings of light who try never to present their true (in their case, vaguely cephalopodan) shape. They usually hide in so-called encounter suits, and, when they don't, most species see them as perfectly beautiful according to the standards of the species in question. I hasten to say that this is not an echo of Xenophanes: it is not "we" who have created the Vorlons in our own image—the Vorlons have manipulated "us". Like most Greek gods, including Apollo, they have a dark side and can be utterly unscrupulous, sacrificing billions without any qualms whatsoever and doing just as much collateral damage as the Shadows. As early as in "Comes the Inquisitor" (II/21, 1995), we learn that the Vorlons abducted Jack the Ripper and made him work for them as an Inquisitor, but only later the authors make it clear that this is just an example of Vorlon ruthlessness. The question the Ripper asks is the typical Vorlon question: "Who are you?" Name, title, or profession are not accepted as relevant answers, and Delenn's perfectly reasonable question "What do you want?" is greeted by a fit of rage because this very question has become the trademark of the Shadows (Wenskus 2014).

The Delphic imperative "Know thyself" is surprisingly important in contemporary science fiction. Three cases in point are *The Matrix I* (Winkler 2005 and Wenskus 2011b), the whole of BSG (Bataille 2014; Garvey 2014; L'Allier 2014), and the second episode of the *Sarah Connor Chronicles* (the TV serial based on the *Terminator* movies), which begins and ends with Sarah quoting and reflecting on this maxim. The title of this episode (I/2, 2008) is actually "Gnothi seauton" in the original transcribed Greek and explicitly connected with the temple of Apollo. But while Sarah Connor only knows the optimistic interpretation of the inscription (she even claims, at the end of

this episode, that the entire quote is: "Know thyself, and thou shalt know all the mysteries of the gods and the universe"), the Vorlons intend to make their followers humble themselves, probably as a kind of security measure. An interesting parallel between the *Matrix I* oracle scene and the B 5 episode "Z'ha'dum" (III/22, 1996) is the question whether, by trying to avoid a certain event, we actually cause it, as in Herodotus's account of the death of Croesus's son (I 34–45) and Sophocles' *King Oedipus*. Note, too, that both the Vorlons and the more famous of the Delphic prophecies (whether invented or not) are notoriously cryptic, but that the Vorlons' utterances are usually brief, often monosyllabic, and only rarely poetic. A final point: the Vorlon ambassador's quarters on Babylon 5 are filled with fumes which are obviously poisonous to humans and several other species. The human telepath Lyta Alexander has been given gill-like implants on the Vorlon Homeworld in order to breathe those fumes. Are they supposed to recall the fumes of Delphi (which are probably a modern myth, as has been argued convincingly by Lehoux 2007) and are we meant to see Lyta as a kind of Pythia?

The connection of the maxim "Know Yourself" to the Greek pantheon is both looser and more obvious in BSG. The humans of BSG worship the gods of the Greek pantheon, possibly because they (the humans) are, as is revealed at the end of the series, not our descendants but our ancestors. In fact, the motto of this series is "All this has happened before. All this will happen again" (quoting the beginning of *Peter Pan*, Walt Disney 1953, see Garvey 2014, p.215). Actually that would be impossible: if at the end of every epoch the human race had to be kick-started anew by a human and a Cylon (i.e. a robot), we would become less and less human throughout the eons, but at the end of the series it seems to transpire that the cycle can be broken (cf. Tomasso 2015). The cyclical view explains why we can know the future without relying on time travel as the other shows of my corpus do. What it doesn't explain is why our ancestors, when praying to the Olympians (also called "Lords of Kobol"), do not follow any of the known Greek rituals or prayer formulae but sound rather like some particularly dour Pilgrim Fathers ("Vale of Tears"; "righteousness", you name it), even more so when they are fanatics as, e.g., the Gemenese in episode II/17, "The Captain's Hand," 2006, according to whom abortion is "an abomination", or why most Cylons are such fervent monotheists.

Philosophy

As regards ancient philosophy, I do not want to indulge in B 5-bashing, but I find it disturbing that in "Exercise of Vital Powers" (IV/16, 1997) the villain Edgars thinks that by planning a genocide he is following the "ancient Greek"

(actually, Aristotle's) definition of happiness and its relation to virtue: "Happiness, they said, was the exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence in a life offering them scope," which is a compromise between the short version of Aristotle's, not definition, but characterization in his *Nicomachean Ethics* 1102 a5, and the longer version of 1098 a16–18. This authorial attitude is utterly unlike the one professed by most *Star Trek* authors, who let some of their villains be erudite enough (especially in the Original Series) but never, explicitly or implicitly, blame Greek philosophers for any atrocity. Of course, the authors of "Exercise of Vital Powers" could protest that they never meant to imply that reading Aristotle made you genocidal (or that knowing the anecdote of Diogenes looking for an honest man would make you a serial killer, like Sebastian, aka Jack the Ripper, in II/21, "Comes the Inquisitor"), but compare what the Star Trek authors did in a similar case: they made it perfectly clear that the Platonians of *Star Trek:* TOS, III/10, "Plato's Stepchildren," are Plato's stepchildren not because Plato has failed them, but because they have not understood what Plato is about. Spock points this out at the end of the episode, showing more emotion than he usually does (Wenskus 2009: 183–187; Kovacs 2015). To be fair, Franklin, the doctor of B 5, knows "Zeno's paradox" ("In the Shadow of Z'ha'dum" (II/17, 1996), though not that there were actually four of them, two or three of which we can reconstruct with some certainty. The *Star Trek* spin-offs are more skillful in their use of the classics than the Original Series, while the B 5 spin-off *Crusade* is even further removed from Mesopotamian and classical antiquity than B 5 was: *Crusade* is a quest story, based neither on the myth of Utnapishtim (or, rather, Uta-napishti) nor on that of the Argonauts nor on the Odyssey, but on Dungeons and Dragons, Tolkien, and some Arthurian motifs. This is not a bad thing per se, but Captain Gideon's summary of Platonic philosophy in *Crusade* ep.7, "The Rules of the Game," 1999, is neither correct nor helpful:

> Plato once said that for everything that exists, there is a perfect form of it somewhere. A perfect human being, a perfect chair, a perfect stick, so that everything is a shadow of that one perfect form. Now, if we follow that train of thought, that means somewhere in the universe there exists the perfect form of an absolute and complete idiot. And he left here an hour ago.

True, there is much we do not know about Plato's Theory of Ideas (including whether he believed in it), and granted, this is a joke, but it is not the sort of joke anyone with a smattering of Greek philosophy would make (Wenskus 2014). You would never catch Spock spouting such nonsense. Sadly, but not surprisingly, the script of this episode is also credited to Straczynski himself (who minored in philosophy).

The most interesting and far reaching reception of Greek philosophy in our corpus concerns the stoic (and I use the term in the non-trivial sense) Vulcans. True, no ancient Stoic is ever quoted or even mentioned during the show, not even Epictetus who is quoted correctly and to great effect by *Boston Legal*'s Alan Shore in II/15, "Smile," 2006 (Wenskus 2011c: 182–183; note that the show shares many actors with *Star Trek*). Nor is Marcus Aurelius, although this emperor (who never seems to have called himself a Stoic but is generally and quite rightly perceived as such) featured so prominently in Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and, to a lesser extent, in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, not to mention the *Dr Who* episode "Deep Breath" (VII/1, 2014), in which Clara claims to have had just one poster in her bedroom when she was fifteen: "Marcus Aurelius. Roman Emperor. Last of the five good ones and Stoic philosopher." Note, however, that at least some Star Trek authors share the popular misconception that Stoicism originated, not in Greece, but in Rome, which may be one of the reasons for the resemblance of, e.g., Spock's father Sarek to the emperor Titus (Wenskus 2009, p. 192–197). Both the ancient Stoics and the Vulcans base their ethics on logic, logic being, as Spock has to remind Valeris in the movie, *The Undiscovered Country* (VI, 1991), "the beginning of wisdom, Valeris, not the end." The Vulcans reject "emotions," or, rather, more or less the same set of emotions the Stoics rejected too, the Greek stoic term being *pathos* which is usually translated into Latin "affectus", German "Affekt" and English "passion." One of the passions we should reject, according both to the Stoics and to the Vulcans, is anger, which is at odds with what most of us think and also what the followers of Plato and Aristotle thought. They maintained that controlled anger is not only excusable but a good thing. The Stoics' answer was that anger, like the other passions, is a wild beast which can never be controlled. Small wonder Stoicism was usually perceived as an admirable philosophy, one which has provided us with valuable insights and much food for thought, but not as a viable model. In the Star Trek universe this attitude is mirrored by the fact that the battle against "emotions" can only be fought by a species which is so similar to us as to be genetically compatible and which has indeed helped us to become intergalactic travelers, but which is also still so alien we would not actually wish to become exactly like them. *Star Trek* (movie XI; 2009) even reassures us that we do not have to: human emotions, according to Sarek, are easier to control than those of the Vulcanoid species (Wenskus 2011a: 80–81).

The only time a Star Trek character uses the term "stoic," however, he does so in the trivial sense: Data in TNG II/6, "The Schizoid Man," 1989, speaking of the irascible Dr. Ira Graves (there may or may not be a pun here). The Star Trek authors probably never read a Stoic text or even a textbook on

Stoicism: all or most of the Stoic elements in Star Trek are either the result of a long tradition involving, among others, Boethius and Shakespeare or of parallel developments. Take one of the best VOY episodes, "Death Wish" (II/17, 1996): if the Roman philosopher Seneca tries to and the energy-being Quinn actually does commit suicide using hemlock (nogatch hemlock, in Quinn's case), they do so because they wish to imitate Socrates whose death, while not legally a suicide, could easily have been perceived as one. The ancient source text for the death of Quinn is the end of Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*: both Socrates and Quinn die peacefully and painlessly, which is highly unlikely from a pharmacological point of view if hemlock actually was the main ingredient used by the Athenian executioner. Furthermore, both are surrounded by their friends and utter famous last words, the difference being that those of Socrates do not seem to make much sense, possibly because he was no longer quite lucid (Wenskus 2009: 193–194). But there is another, far more important and thought-provoking difference. In Plato's *Apology* 41, Socrates hopes he is about to enter a better world, one in which he can discuss ethics with, for example, Homer. Quinn just wants to pass into nothingness because he has already discussed everything worth discussing with the other members of the Q continuum and is by now tired of being immortal (Wenskus 2009: 193–194). Eternal life seems to be overrated. But is it? Dante would have said "It depends whether you spend it close to God or not". Quinn's existence is mirrored by that of the noble heathens in the Limbo (*Inferno* 4, 25–131), which means that, according to Dante, Socrates got exactly what he wished for, including the company of Homer, because, being a heathen, he did not know any better. The authors of VOY, or some of them, may have been aware of this. Dante is, apart from the author of *Beowulf*, the only medieval author quoted on the show (Wenskus 2009, 41) who has not been invented by the show's authors: when Janeway tries to make up her mind whether Quinn's suicide is ethical or not, the text she thinks most relevant is from the Bolian Middle Ages. Again, no mention of Stoicism, in spite of the fact that Seneca for one recommends suicide in the case of the onset of dementia (*Letter to Lucilius* 58).

History

As for ancient history, for reasons explained by Nisbet (2006), Greek history is almost totally absent from our corpus, with a few exceptions, particularly Xenophon's expedition in BSG and the Battle of Thermopylae in the last episode of Star Trek: DSN (VII, "What You Leave Behind," 1999; for this and a few token mentions of Alexander the Great, see Wenskus 2009: 198–200).

The impact of ancient Rome, mostly via blockbusters such as *Quo Vadis* and *Spartacus*, is far greater, but despite the importance of the time-travel motif in *Star Trek* and, though in a lesser extent, B 5, only *Dr Who* takes us to if not ancient Rome (or rather, as the Doctor says, "brand new Rome"), to Pompeii. This fact slowly dawns on the Doctor and his companion Donna Noble when they find, instead of seven hills, one single smoking mountain (IV/2, "The Fires of Pompeii," 2008). While the writing of the show has not met with unanimous praise, it has much to recommend it, including a lot of good solid facts: the Doctor tells us that the Romans did not have a word for "volcano" at the time, which seems incredible but is perfectly true, and the actions of the victims match the archeological evidence, thus creating, together with Donna's appalled reaction ("Oh, great. They can learn a new word. As they die."), a sense of horror which is even more poignant because this show is often extremely funny. As Fiona Hobden (2009) remarks, "although accuracy in historical detail is never a stated agenda, the comprehension of history through emotional engagement stands to the fore." The sets reused some of the sets from the show *Rome,* but also the Temple of Peace, Cardiff. In fact, most of *Dr Who* and, especially, *Torchwood* is filmed in Cardiff, and taking the cast to Rome's Cinecittà was highly unusual for the show. However, great care is taken not to show any object or work of art of an overtly sexual nature. The sources are not the letters of the Younger Pliny, but the BBC docudrama *Pompeii: The Last Day* (2003) and the *Cambridge Latin Course*. Writer James Moran allegedly based the characters of Caecilius, Metella and Quintus on members of Caecilius's family of said course but he creates an alternate ending to their story by having the Doctor save the whole family (including Evelina, the only character invented by Moran) in the nick of time after he has had a change of heart. At the end of Book I of the *Cambridge Latin Course* both parents die on the day of the eruption and only Quintus survives. The names are partly correct (those based on the *Cambridge Latin Course*), one (Evelina) is neither Latin nor, as far as I see, supposed to be funny; it just ends with an "a," which seems to be Latin enough for most people, while that of Lucius Petrus Dextrus (whose right arm has been turned to stone) is dog Latin and a linguistic joke more similar to the *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) variety than to those of the comic book series *Asterix*, at least those of the French original. Still, it does consist of three names instead of just two. Probably the best joke is the following: the TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimension in Space, the Doctor's time travelling device) translates everything Donna and the Doctor say into Latin, although it sounds English to Donna and the audience, but whenever Donna or the Doctor switch to what sounds Latin to them and to us ("Veni vidi vici!") the Pompeiians don't understand

a word and assume they are speaking Celtic. However, they take Donna and the Doctor at face value when they both claim to be Spartacus ("Mr. and Mrs. Spartacus?"), harking back to the single most influential movie as far as many SF authors are concerned (Wenskus 2009, 219–224). But if the production team attribute the apologetic catchphrase "He is from Barcelona" to Sybil Fawlty, this may be an afterthought designed to form a meta-pun on the Sibylline Sisterhood which almost causes the end of not only our world in this episode: other *Fawlty Towers* (1975 and 1979) characters use it too.

While *Star Trek* shows many civilizations that owe a lot to popular reception of ancient Rome, and while the gladiator motif is prominent in more than one episode—and indeed in many other SF shows (Wenskus 2009: 219–224; Harrisson 2014, who, however, takes no notice of previous research unless published in English), the Romulans do not seem to go in for gladiators. Nor do the Vulcans, the dystopian elements of their culture owing much to their other model, Cold War China, while the Mirror Universe episodes, some of which are really very good, often, but not always, combine Rome with Nazi Germany (Wenskus 2009: 205–207). But when Star Trek characters talk about Roman history they tend to show how little the authors knew of this subject. The most notable example is Captain Picard in "The Best of Both Worlds," Part I (III/26, 1990): "I wonder if the Emperor Honorius watching the Visigoths coming over the seventh hill truly realized the Roman Empire was about to fall." Picard seems to think the Seven Hills of Rome were some kind of bulwark or indeed system of bulwarks which had to be negotiated (one after the other, Picard seems to assume) before entering the city. Besides, Rome certainly did not fall in the year 410 when it was invaded by Alaric and his Visigoths, and while some (although no historian I know of) might dispute this point we know for a fact that Honorius was not present at the sack of Rome, residing as he did in Ravenna (since 404), a town he only left for travel, not for military campaigns (Wenskus 2009, 207). This is a typical case of what happens if a character is more erudite than his or her authors.

In B 5, there are obvious parallels between the Centauri and the Roman Empire; in fact, the only episode with a (dog) Latin title, "Sic Transit Vir" (III/12, 1996), is about the Centauri Vir Cotto. This parallel has been pointed out by various B 5 fans, notably Antony Keen in his blog (2004) and Straczynski himself, particularly in his running commentaries. I follow the generally accepted line of thought that Straczynski's main sources seem to be the TV series *I, Claudius* (not the novel by Robert Graves on which it is based) and some other screen treatments. As Tony Keen has pointed out, Cartagia's method of curing coughs (by cutting the patient's head off) parallels

Caligula's method in the *I, Claudius* episode "Zeus, by Jove" (November 8, 1976) but there is no corresponding scene in the novel (for the fall of Sejanus in *I, Claudius*, see Wenskus, 2014: 495–496). But while there are other models for the Centauri Republic besides Rome (Keen 2004), there seem to be no Roman Nazis on Straczynski's Centauri. Neither are there powerful women, apart from the seers. The evil Livia of *I, Claudius* has no Centauri counterpart: while one of Mollari's three wives does try to poison him (II/7, "Soul Mates," 1994), she only wants to avoid a divorce, not to establish a dynasty. Another important point Tony Keen makes is that the depiction of Cartagia as a mad emperor makes his character far more predictable than Straczynski claimed. However, this pitfall might have been avoided, as is shown by Jack Gleeson's chillingly convincing yet unpredictable portrayal of the even madder and far more sadistic King Joffrey in the TV series *Game of Thrones* (I–IV, 2011–2014) who, besides having fair hair as has Caligula in the *I, Claudius* series, looks far more like the ancient portraits of Caligula (e.g. the one in the Metropolitan Museum of Art) than Cartagia did.

It should be abundantly clear by now that watching SF is no substitute for a classical education, be it ever so basic, even if or, indeed, particularly if, one also listens to the authors' interviews, running commentaries etc. But then neither is it a substitute for equally basic courses in science, and yet quite a few scientists and astronauts claim to have been inspired by *Star Trek*, e.g. Samantha Cristoforetti, Italy's first female astronaut (interviewed in *Adesso* 2015/3: 68–69), and if taxpayers are more easily persuaded that money spent on quantum physics is money well spent if they have previously watched *Star Trek*, that surely is a good thing. On a smaller scale something similar holds true for the study of the classics. Even if many members of the public may think archeologists ought to be spending more time fighting Nazis for the Ark of the Covenant, we should not be snobbish but explain why Latin might, and should still, be taught at Starfleet Academy.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Ancient World is Part of Us: Classical Tragedy in Modern Film and Television

Anastasia Bakogianni

Like the shape-shifter Proteus, the "afterlife" of ancient Greece and Rome takes many forms. But unlike Menelaus, who had to put a stop to the metamorphoses of the Old Man of the Sea in order to obtain the information he needed (*Odyssey* 4.351–425), classicists have not been able to contain or even direct the many paths which classical reception has taken. Nor is this our task: we are not the gatekeepers of the classical past. Working within classical reception means acknowledging how pervasive the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome are within our own time, as well as during the centuries that have elapsed since the end of classical antiquity. Among the most recognizable examples of classical reception are those that can be found in cinema and television. Indeed, the reception of ancient Greece and Rome on screen has become a test case for thinking about classical reception in general and the place of Greco-Roman antiquity in the modern world.

The reception of Greek tragedy on film is an interesting case because its elitist associations clash with the popularity of the modern media of cinema and television. In the fifth century BC the performance of drama was an essential facet of popular culture in the democratic *polis* of Athens. But even in the popular media of cinema and television receptions of Greek tragedy still remain a minority interest for film-makers and audiences alike. A number of important cinematic receptions of Greek tragedy are explored in this

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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volume, but this chapter investigates a different facet of this phenomenon. Rather than straightforward receptions of ancient Greek dramas in cinema and television, for example Michael Cacoyannis's Euripidean trilogy that is directly modeled on the ancient tragedian's plays (see my Chapter 7), my discussion in this chapter focuses on more "indirect" adaptations that either disguise their debt to Greek tragedy and/or take greater liberties with their source texts to the point where the precise nature of this connection becomes highly unstable. This category greatly enlarges the scope of our enquiry, but also problematizes what it is we seek. Who has the authority to proclaim that these films are receptions of Greek tragedy? Is it the director, film critics, classical scholars and/or their audiences? And does it even matter how this connection to an ancient dramatic source was established? From the point of view of pedagogy can we effectively debate such "masked" receptions in the classroom?

Indirect receptions undermine simplistic hierarchical relationships in which the Greek "original" (and I use the term ironically here given the inherent textual instability of our surviving Greek tragic corpus and the impossibility of returning to an "original" text) is self-evidently superior to a later reception "text." Kenneth MacKinnon categorized films loosely based on Greek tragedy as belonging to the "filmic mode" because they do not claim "to be the original in transposed form" (1986: 97). In other words, they do not play the "fidelity" card. Classicists often tend to prioritize the ancient source and discuss the reception in terms of what it lacks. In order to engage with the important questions outlined above I have had recourse to developments in adaptation studies which problematize the very concept of what an adaptation is and how we as its audience relate to it.

To illustrate these debates from a classical perspective I have chosen to focus on the transformations of the tragic heroine Electra in a series of case studies where the relationship between film and classical source text(s) is not straightforward. My first three case studies belong to the world of art-house cinema, with directors who enjoy auteur status. Chronologically arranged they are Luchino Visconti's *Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa* (1965), also known by its US title *Sandra of a Thousand Delights* (henceforth *Sandra*);[1] Miklós Jancsó's *Szerelmem, Elektra* (1974, *Electra, My Love* in English, but also known as *Elektreia*); and Theo Angelopoulos's *O Thiasos* (English title: *The Travelling Players*, 1975). In mainstream cinema, I will examine the character of Elektra in *Daredevil* (2003) and *Elektra* (2004), self-proclaimed adaptations, not of any Greek tragedy but of a series of graphic novels charting the life of Elektra Natchios, a Greek *femme fatale* and ninja assassin. I argue, however, that there is a tantalizing connection to the ancient Electra that should lead us to re-examine our perception of what happens to classical stories and characters

in popular culture. In the same vein, an arguably even more tangential connection can be established with another female avenger, Emily Thorne, in the popular ABC television series *Revenge* (2011–2015). By tracing Electra as an ancient character circulating between different media (specifically theatre, literature, cinema and television) we can investigate what we can learn from putting these "texts" into dialogic interplay.

Theoretical Concerns: "Borrowing" from Adaptation Studies?

Adaptation studies came to prominence in the twentieth century, which is perhaps not surprising given the increasing regularity and prominence of adaptations in our post-modern society. But the field is characterized by a lack of theoretical and methodological consensus and there is fierce debate over its boundaries, vocabulary and, more basically, agreement on how to define the concept of "adaptation." But rather than seeing the fierce debates that scholars working in this area engage in as a drawback we can take advantage of its open-endedness (Leitch 2013: 103) to join the debate and to consider how it can benefit classical reception studies. Of particular interest are the debates surrounding the question of fidelity,[2] and the search for non-hierarchical terminology that captures the kinetic energy of the process of adaptation (cf. Sanders' Glossary, 2006: 161–164). The model of complex networks of connections, based on concepts drawn from the science of human evolution,[3] is also particularly germane as a theoretical and methodological approach.

As classicists we tend to prioritize the value of our source texts and we always return to the question of fidelity as a means of drawing attention to the importance of ancient antiquity, its literature, art and culture. But as long as we refuse to accept that translation and adaptation inevitably leads to infidelity (Cutchins 2014: 52) we will always view them as inferior rather than as creative new works of art. Sometimes it is only when we experience Greek tragedy performed on the modern stage or on screen that we arrive at a full understanding of the dramas and their relationship to us, both as readers and more importantly as spectators. It is a well-known fact among classicists that the Greek tragedians were themselves the receivers/adaptors of earlier epic, lyric and mythological narratives, which they transformed for performance on the Athenian stage in the exciting new medium of theatre. Greek tragedy's canonical status as "great literature" has, however, meant that all its receptions in the modern period have generally tended to be seen as inferior. But, in a post-modern world when the canonical status of all classical works of

literature have been challenged, surely it is time to let go of our obsession with fidelity and to examine receptions on their own merits and in terms of what is "added" rather than what is "lost" during the process of adaptation.

To use an example from my own work on Michael Cacoyannis's cinematic receptions of Euripides' dramas (Chapter 7 in this volume): I am always concerned with the question of what has changed and more crucially why, but the ancient dramatic texts remain a touchstone throughout my investigations. An examination of the similarities and, more crucially, the differences from their classical sources is often the way we encourage our students to approach these films. Contextualizing them within their historical, sociopolitical, and cultural frameworks also provides them with a basis for approaching the changes that film-makers have introduced and examining the reasons behind their decisions. Maria Wyke's pioneering work in this area (1997), arising out of her teaching practice, has paved the way for further research along similar lines. But we still have a long way to go before we stop placing such a high premium on fidelity or to give it its other name, the search for "authenticity" (see especially, Michelakis 2013: 57–79). Admittedly, I am guilty of subscribing to the view that film cannot be as complex as literature (Whelehan 1999: 6). In addition to film's democratizing effect, however, the new "meanings" it brings into play are themselves worthy of analysis, particularly as examples of how classical "travelling concepts" can be traced across disciplines (Elliott 2013: 36).

To label something an adaptation is an interpretative choice (Hutcheon 2006: 6). Drawing attention to a potential connection between a source and another work of art that is perceived to be its reception activates a relationship between the two (Schober 2013: 98). Such connections are, however, fluid and subject to change as they depend upon particular ways of understanding the "meaning" of texts and these are in constant negotiation and subject to modification and alteration over time. This model of connectivity emphasizes the "intertextuality" of all texts, the fact that they form part of complex networks of texts, with which they are in constant dynamic interaction (Schober 2013: 103–105; Cutchins 2014: 44).

Biological evolution offers us a useful model with which to think about how certain ideas perpetuate themselves in our culture. These "memes, micro-units of cultural knowledge and practice" (Leitch 2013: 167) can cross from brain to brain in the same way that genes do in the gene pool. Fertile memes are like virulent viruses that are particularly effective in colonizing the brain and more generally our culture (Blackmore 1999; Distin 2005). Linda Costanzo Cahir (2006: 14) argues that the process of adaptation involves altering (sometimes radically) "the structure or function of an entity so that it is better fitted to survive and multiply in its new environment."

Texts that have been adapted again and again, or to put it another way texts that have a long reception history, are culturally successful and this guarantees their longevity (Bryant 2013: 50). In my discussion I am seeking an answer to the question of which are the classical Electra's strongest memes by investigating a wide range of her receptions on screen.

The focus of the discussion in this chapter is on freer adaptations where the connection with a source text(s) is much harder to establish and the existence of a relationship itself comes into question. Could we argue that this is simply a question of degree? Arguably Angelopoulos's and Jancsó's Electras offer us the least "masked" receptions of the ancient tragic heroine. But they are both unquestionably new works with a complicated relationship to the ancient Greek dramas featuring Electra, namely Aeschylus's *Choephori* (458 BC), Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra* plays[4] and the latter's *Orestes* (408 BC). The skeleton of the ancient story has been transplanted into new political and cultural contexts, and national agendas. The same is true of the other possible connections that are made in this chapter where the precise nature of the relationship is even harder to pinpoint. That is why it is so important to think of adaptation as a two-way process that brings a text into a dialogic interrelationship with all its successors (Bruhn 2013: 70). They in turn impact our understanding of our source text and irrevocably alter it. It might be impossible to unpick all the threads of this complex conversation between texts, but we must nevertheless make the attempt. And I would argue celebrate the richness, variety and creativity of this polyphony.

Looking for Electra

Our modern fascination with stories of revenge is only matched by societal anxiety when it is a woman desiring said revenge and worse actively enacting it. The idea of a man pursuing *lex talionis*, the "eye for an eye" principle that dictates that a crime should be punished by inflicting precisely the same injury that the victim received, can be portrayed sympathetically in the arts.[5] One of world theater's most famous and often-performed tragedies, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is a play about a son seeking to avenge his father's death.[6] Recent examples on screen featuring a man seeking to avenge the death of a family member(s) include the very violent *Law Abiding Citizen* (2009), and *John Wick* (2014). But when it is a daughter seeking to avenge her father's murder, as Electra famously does in Greek tragedy, this is often seen as less acceptable. Women avengers, however, continue to exert a fascination over modern viewers, especially film audiences.

Hollywood's notorious "Production Code"[7] contains an interesting passage with regards to the depiction of revenge in motion pictures:

> Revenge in modern times shall not be justified. In lands and ages of less developed civilization and moral principles, revenge may sometimes be presented. This would be the case especially in places where no law exists to cover the crime because of which revenge is committed. (Association of Motion Picture Producers 1934: 16)

This injunction against the portrayal of revenge on screen proceeds out of one of the code's fundamental principles that "the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin" (1934: 2). The code's paternalistic attitude towards mass audiences unmasks its authors' fear of the seductive power of cinema. Lower-class members of the audience were deemed incapable of distinguishing between reality and the world of film, and it was feared that they would easily fall prey to the allure of sins like revenge, if they were portrayed on film. Electra's reception on the silver screen and in television in a sense justifies all the censors' worst fears because it is precisely her desire for vengeance that seems to continue to captivate filmmakers and audiences alike.

Independent filmmakers like Angelopoulos, Jancsó and Visconti have sought to create a more personal aesthetic in their films. They were less concerned with fidelity to any source text(s) and more with remaining true to their own directorial vision (Cobb 2012: 107). Each in their own individual way, in collaboration with their actors, cinematographers, and other key movie personnel, created a distinctive cinematic Electra. All of the case studies discussed in this chapters share one key characteristic: they are not constrained by the dramatic texts of the three ancient tragedians. The filmmakers responded instead to key elements of the myth of Electra: her role as the chief mourner of her father, her relationship with her brother, her hatred of her mother and her liminality, in particular Electra's role as a female "other" pursuing vengeance against those who have wronged her family. Of the three films, Jancsó's movie proclaims its connection to the ancient story by the use of Electra's name in the title of the movie. Her name is also used throughout the film, as are those of Orestes and Aegisthus, but not that of Clytemnestra who died ten years before the events depicted in the film. Angelopoulos called his heroine Electra only in the screenplay of his movie thus further masking her connection to the ancient heroine. Finally, Visconti renamed his heroine Sandra, so that any affinities with the ancient story are confined to the visual and narrative planes. An interesting phenomenon in the reception of Electra in these art-house films is that they

all prioritize Electra's relationship with her brother Orestes, even at times to the detriment of her famous devotion to her father's memory (and, in popular receptions featuring a female avenger, both are replaced by a key romantic relationship).

Szerelmem, Elektra (1974) by the Hungarian director Miklós Jancsó (1921–2014) offers us a revolutionary Electra who fights against the tyranny of Aegisthus (József Madaras) (see MacKinnon 1986: 117–123; Michelakis 2013: Chapter 7 and 220–222). Jancsó's film belongs to a larger movement within theatre and cinema that utilized Greek tragedy as a weapon in the fight against oppression.[8] *Szerelmem, Elektra* differs from other offerings, however, in that it does not reject violence outright; rather, it seeks to establish the existence of an endless cycle of oppression followed by revolution. This principle is encapsulated in the scene in which Elektra (Mari Törőcsik) and her brother Orestes (György Cserhalmi) kill each other over and over again, but are always brought back to life. In the finale of the film the siblings embrace and climb onboard a red helicopter, a symbol of revolution, but also a visual sign of the artificiality of the cinematic medium. This jarring note produced by the introduction of modern technology contrasts sharply with the pre-industrial setting and the Hungarian landscape of wide open plains. Elektra in a voiceover introduces the Slavic myth of the firebird "that must die each day to be reborn the day after."[9] Like Elektra and Orestes the firebird is another potent symbol of revolution: "Blessed be your name, revolution." But the film's message is more complex than this slogan would suggest. After their helicopter ride the siblings return to earth to lead a final dance of the people. The communal song with which the movie ends delivers a rather ambiguous message: "… Or we are just fools, and all of us shall die, or our great hope shall turn into reality…" they sing, referring to their dreams of a better, more equitable world.[10]

Jancsó's film is in fact not an adaptation of a Greek tragedy, but of a 1968 play of the same name by László Gyurkó (1930–2007). The key themes of perpetual revolution and the portrayal of Electra as the personification of this principle have their roots in Gyurkó's source text. Both play and film are steeped in Hungarian history and politics. The brutal suppression of the 1956 Revolution in Hungary, when Soviet troops put a violent end to a spontaneous national uprising, is one of the key contexts against which the film's questioning of the revolutionary principle should be examined. The notes of doubt that are openly acknowledged in the finale undercut the celebratory mood of the final scenes. The didactic message of the film, which on first viewing appears to wholeheartedly endorse the value of revolution, is further undermined by the choice of an ancient story about a family that destroys itself from within. The ancient blood feud of the

House of Atreus is enacted as a spectacle for the film audience's enjoyment: in the early scene when Elektra unknowingly kills her brother, and more pointedly towards the end of the film when Orestes and Elektra repeatedly shoot each other dead.

The film's female protagonist is a vengeful mourner who never hesitates to take violent action when the opportunity arises, as, for example, when she kills Orestes in the mistaken belief that he brought news of her brother's death. When at the beginning of the film the other women urge Elektra to forget, she performs her identity with the following words "I, Electra, who doesn't forget." This Hungarian Electra has chosen to continue her existence as a perpetual living reminder of her father's murder. Aegisthus and his aide try to dissuade her from continuing down this path of resistance to the regime, but her reply is "Electra dead is Electra. You have no power over me because I am justice." This Electra clearly sees herself and her brother as instruments of justice, especially since their desire for vengeance is uncomplicated by the need for matricide. Elektra's verbal battles with Aegisthus culminate in his decision to have her executed for her murder of the messenger. Elektra responds by berating the people for meekly accepting his tyrannical rule. Her role is that of the Socratic gadfly that pricks people's consciousness. But in victory this Electra is also capable of compassion as evinced in the scene where she offers Aegisthus food after Orestes deposes him. It is Orestes, in his traditional role as the avenger, who kills the former tyrant by shooting him. In other words, Elektra's mightiest weapons in *Szerelmem, Elektra* are her words, just as in the ancient versions.

One of the most striking elements of the film is its use of communal ritual. A large crowd of people is never far from the protagonists, highlighting the importance of the wider community. The audience directly witnesses how changes in government affect the people. This large cast of extras becomes the chorus of the story; an internal audience that is invested in the siblings' plans to overthrow Aegisthus's tyranny. In Jancsó's film this becomes their primary goal overshadowing more personal concerns. This internal chorus, divided among several distinctive groups, is used to perform ritualistic gestures that act as visual signs reinforcing the film's main narrative thread. A striking example of the use of ritual is the group of men who lash the air, a visible reminder of the discipline that Aegisthus imposes on his people and how he uses fear to control them. There are also visual affinities between the film and famous ancient scenes from Electra's story. During the "feast of justice," the annual ceremony held to commemorate Agamemnon's death, the camera lingers on a pool filled with red water. A group of naked women holding urns use these vessels to pour more water into the pool. To a knowledgeable audience familiar with the ancient myths this acts as a visual

reminder of the version of Agamemnon's murder in which he is killed in the bath. There is also a brief silent scene during which Elektra is married to a dwarf, which echoes the plot of Euripides' *Electra*, in which the tragic heroine has been forced to marry a peasant.

At the beginning of the film, the chorus and Chrysothemis (Gabi Jobba), still under the sway of Aegisthus, are largely unsupportive of Electra. Choreographed movements and songs serve as a symbolic background to Elektra's actions and emphasize her isolation from the community. The women's dance is reminiscent of a folk dance and the lit candles placed on the grassy hill create an atmosphere infused with religious connotations, reinforced by the fact that Elektra appears carrying a knife as if ready to carry out the necessary sacrifice which will usher in a better future (Figure 21.1). The victim of that sacrifice turns out to be her own brother and ultimately herself, too. Only through self-sacrifice can the new world become possible. This Elektra has to die and be reborn. She thus becomes a symbol not only the cyclical nature of history, but also of the ancient heroine's many reincarnations, and of her refusal to stay dead and forgotten.

The modern Greek director Theo Angelopoulos (1935–2012) referenced a number of ancient Greek myths in his cinematic oeuvre (Pomeroy 2008: 82–92). In his *O Thiasos* (1975), he created a distinctive modern Greek Electra (Michelakis 2013: Chapter 7). But Angelopoulos did not set out to create a cinematic version of any of the three ancient tragedians' dramas.

Figure 21.1 Screenshot of the female chorus from *Szerelmem, Elektra*.

Instead his film follows a troupe of actors, the *thiasos* of the title. Their personal lives are interrupted and shaped by the historical events that shook the modern state of Greece in the years between 1939 and 1952, which included the outbreak of the Second World War, the Nazi occupation of Greece (1941–1944), the liberation (1944), the Civil War (1946–1949), and the political and economic struggles that followed. The epic tone of Angelopoulos's film echoes that of Aeschylus's famous *Oresteia* trilogy, while the inherent irony and realistic portrayal of the motivation of his characters is reminiscent of Euripides. The presence of the character of Chrysothemis (Maria Vassiliou) raises the shadow of Sophocles' tragic version. Angelopoulos, however, mainly connected with the classical past at the level of myth rather than with specific dramatic texts. In *Thiasos* classical myth is used as narrative bedrock, but its ultimate function is to underscore historical reality. Angelopoulos argued that the veneration of the past is counterproductive and even dangerous: "The Greeks grew up caressing tombs. I tried to bring myth down to the level of the people" (Angelopoulos 2000: 84). *Thiasos* represents an attempt to exorcise the mythical curse under which the House of Atreus labors through its transformation into a modern story of a group of travelling actors living through real historical events. Myth thus becomes history.

The daughter of the leader of the *thiasos* (Eva Kotamanidou) is called Electra in the script. Even though the main characters were all given ancient names in the screenplay, they are not named in the film itself, the exception being Orestes (Petros Zarkadis). This partially masks any direct echoes of their ancient counterparts (Angelopoulos quoted in 2000, 182). Angelopoulos shifts the emphasis of the ancient story by choosing to emphasize Electra's devotion to her brother rather than to her father (Stratos Pachis). The one scene in the film where the myth of the vengeance of Orestes is most strongly evoked takes place when the son comes down off the mountains at night. Guided by Electra he reaches the theatre where the troupe is performing. This modern Orestes' reasons for wanting vengeance are not solely personal, however. His mother's lover betrayed Orestes and his father to the Germans. The father was executed by a German firing squad. The personal aspect of his motivation is thus overlaid in Angelopoulos's film by the political (Angelopoulos 2000: 184).

In ancient Greek theatre violence generally took place offstage, but in Angelopoulos's *Thiasos* we watch Orestes shoot and kill both his mother (Aliki Georgouli) and her lover (Vangelis Kazan) to the wild applause of the audience who mistakenly believe that the murders are part of the action of the play. The audience's inappropriate response draws attention to the deliberate blurring of fiction and reality in the film. They are applauding a real murder, not realizing that what they are witnessing is in fact "real," but of

course the internal audience's misreading of the situation only serves to highlight the presence of the external audience (the film's viewers) watching a movie, another type of performance. This blurring of the boundaries breaks through the fourth wall and connects the space and time of the events depicted in the film to the present realities of the audience. Reality and metatheatricality are thus tightly interwoven in *Thiasos*. Moreover, the audience is deliberately unsettled by being made uncomfortably aware of their voyeuristic gaze and their complicity in the violence they are watching on screen.

Electra's most powerful scene of lamentation takes place over the dead body of Orestes in prison. She is summoned to collect his remains from the prison, where he has been executed for refusing to disavow his communist beliefs. Orestes is buried in a simple grave in the countryside to the accompaniment of applause sparked off by Electra. Despite his many years as a fighter, ultimately the troupe remembers him best as the actor who played the young lover in the Greek romantic melodrama *Golfo* (a Greek version of the Romeo and Juliet story). Electra's love for her brother shines through in Angelopoulos's film. She never betrays him, even when she is interrogated while being raped by a group of right-wing secret policemen, who all wear masks to hide their identities. Only Electra who is being held down and slapped is recognizable in this scene. Any empathy that the audience might feel for her, however, is immediately dispelled by the commencement of her soliloquy in which she addresses the viewer directly (Figure 21.2). This

Figure 21.2 Electra's monologue.

device that Angelopoulos uses at two more key moments in his film embeds the personal dramas of the actors within the wider historical and political modern Greek context. Facing the camera, Electra recounts the events that led to the battle of Athens in December of 1944 when demonstrators clashed with British forces on the streets of the capital. The left-wing resistance group ELAS responded by counter-attacking the allied forces. This dark event in modern Greek history overshadows Electra's personal ordeal.

This scene is an example of Angelopoulos's deliberate distancing of the viewer. Electra's monologue, which cuts into the scene of her rape, undermines any feelings of empathy that the audience might have felt. Angelopoulos's protagonists resemble symbolic archetypes caught up in the turbulent undercurrents of history, rather than fully embodied characters. An admirer of Bertold Brecht, Angelopoulos believed in the value of the *Verfremdungseffect* (the deliberate alienation of the audience). The scene is a visual reminder to the viewer of the artificiality of the medium of film and of the importance of our role as spectators in creating meaning. Angelopoulos deliberately distances the viewer from the action. His *Thiasos* does not offer its audience a realistic, linear narrative, but rather a surrealistic chronological puzzle that the viewer has to assemble in order to interpret the action and to form an opinion about the "meaning" of the film. Furthermore, the length (nearly four hours) and the slow pace of his film encourage a contemplative reading of his cinematic text.

The director also offers his viewers a bleak picture of Modern Greece in *Thiasos*, both on the interpersonal and in the political sense, as well as in visual terms. The bleak landscape in the film is particularly striking and a fitting background to the personal tragedies of the actors and the overall sense of political disenchantment. One of the practical difficulties Angelopoulos encountered while filming was that he had to avoid the sun, which in general is never long absent in Greece (2000: 187). But he was determined to avoid the tourist postcard view of Greece as a land of sun and beautiful beaches. Much of the action of the film takes place in winter while rain and even snow falls. The acting troupe mostly performs in small theaters and tavernas in poor mountain villages. They eke out an impoverished and perilous existence. The grandeur of the story of the fall of the house of Atreus becomes almost absurd when transported to this new twentieth-century setting, but the human dramas of Electra, Orestes and the other actors caught in the maelstrom of history also become less mythic and more grounded in historical reality. Angelopoulos seems to want to exorcise the mythical past. No sympathy is offered for this Electra and her desire for vengeance or even her idealist left-wing politics. In fact, Electra returns to her traditional role as mourner mourning not only her father and brother, but also perhaps Greece itself.

Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa (1965) is arguably the most loosely based example of my three chosen case studies of Electra's reception in art-house cinema. No ancient names are used, even in disguised form, and the setting is entirely contemporary. Electra is renamed Sandra (Claudia Cardinale) and her possible connections with the ancient heroine emerge only gradually. They are not readily apparent to spectators who are unfamiliar with the ancient story. Nor indeed are they necessary for an appreciation of the film. Awareness of the ancient story of Electra and Orestes simply serves to add yet another layer of associations that can deepen the enjoyment and engagement of classically informed audiences (Martindale 2013: 169). Freed from the need to constantly draw parallels with the ancient story, students can use this case study to examine the film as a new work of art and as an example of an independent film-maker's creative reception of the myth. This perspective can in turn illuminate their work on Jancsó's *Szerelmem, Elektra* and Angelopoulos's *Thiasos* and problematize their perception of the process of reception itself.

The Italian director Luchino Visconti (1906–1976) utilizes the *nostos* theme to chart the heroine's return home to Volterra, a city in the hills of Tuscany. Rather than a joyful family reunion, however, the heroine's return only serves to stir up old ghosts and ultimately ends up destroying her marriage and, quite possibly, her future. This ill-fated *nostos* is the narrative engine that drives the plot forward. When Sandra first arrives at her old home accompanied by Andrew Dawdson (Michael Craig), her American husband, she intends to stay only long enough to finalize plans for a bequest to the city in her father's memory. But she is immediately sucked into the past, which begins to weigh her down and cuts off all avenues of escape. The story of her father's betrayal to the Germans in 1942 and his death in Auschwitz is gradually revealed mostly in flashbacks in which the viewers witness Sandra clash with her mad mother Corinna (Marie Bell). In Visconti's film it is the mother who is confined and the daughter who lives a prosperous life. Electra and Clytemnestra's traditional positions are thus reversed in this modern Freudian tale of a dysfunctional family. Gradually the family secrets come out of the closet and the viewer is given more clues about the family's dark past.

The most obvious mystery concerns the fate of Sandra's father. Although never explicitly confirmed, Sandra's suspicions that her mother and the Aegisthus character, the lawyer Antonio Gilardini (Renzo Ricci), were in fact the ones that betrayed her father to the Germans appear to have some basis in fact. In one flashback Corinna attacks Sandra by saying that the Jewish taint in her blood is to blame for her daughter's vices. Andrew reveals that he met Sandra in Geneva when they both worked for the commission investigating what happened in the concentration camp. The Sandra/Electra figure is thus

on a search for the truth of what happened to her father. Sandra's devotion to her family is established early on. Upon her return she wonders around the old house touching the furniture and weeping. She visits her mother's old apartments now shut up and eventually ends up in the garden, where she embraces her father's covered marble bust. The scene in the garden ominously raises the ghosts of the past. As the wind audibly whistles through the trees Sandra comes face to face with her brother Gianni Wald-Luzzati (Jean Sorel). Their embrace visually signals their close relationship. Despite monetary difficulties both siblings willingly sign over the deed to the garden of their family house, so that a park can be created in honor of their father's memory. The film ends with the dedication ceremony when Sandra reveals the bust of her father to the assembled dignitaries.

A darker secret than the identity of the traitor who betrayed the father figure to the German authorities oppresses this family, however. From their overly familiar first greeting and throughout the film suspicion grows as to the precise nature of the brother–sister relationship. As Bosley Crowther argued in his 1966 review of the film for *The New York Times* (January 17, 1966) an incestuous relationship is "not an implausible supposition within the range of the classic theme"; certainly not in a post-Freudian world. Whether this accusation leveled against Gianni and Sandra is true or not is never explicitly stated, but their relationship is clearly abnormally close and poisons Sandra's marriage, which collapses under the weight of suspicion. In the scenes between brother and sister, the camera reveals the depth of the psychological bonds that unite them, as when Gianni lays his head in Sandra's lap and she caresses his hair. After boasting to Sandra about the imminent publication of a tell-all autobiographical novel, Gianni confesses that he experienced a moment of deep personal crisis on the day he heard the news of his sister's impending marriage. He proclaims that only his sister can allay his deep-seated fear of loneliness. Sandra guiltily disengages from her brother when she hears her husband's approach. Gilardini's veiled accusations prove the last straw for her husband who attacks Gianni. Sandra interferes to protect her brother. Andrew abandons Sandra, but he offers her hope of a future reunion in a letter he leaves behind in which he expresses his hope that she will join him and finally escape the past.

The ending of the film leaves the outcome open-ended. Gianni burns his manuscript (his version of the events of the family's past) and commits suicide. But he changes his mind at the very end and realizes that he does not in fact really want to die. The last word that leaves his lips is Sandra's name. His body is discovered and the film ends just as the young doctor Pietro Formari (Fred Williams) approaches Sandra with the news, thus leaving the audience in some doubt about Sandra's reaction. Will her brother's death free her or bind her more tightly to the past? The heroine of Visconti's film

seems to instinctively distrust men and resists all their attempts to project their desires onto her. But the past is a deadly trap that seems to imprison Sandra and entomb her in the decaying family house and city. Knowledge of the classical story of Electra and her many receptions points towards a tragic ending where Sandra's female energy is stifled by the weight of the family history. In comparison to Jancsó's and Angelopoulos's cinematic versions of the Electra narrative, with their emphasis on political interpretations of the ancient story, Visconti's film foregrounds more personal, psychological concerns. Stylistically it also seems less troubled by the desire to alienate its audiences. Instead it draws them in ever deeper into Sandra's dark world.

Shades of Electra

Charles Martindale has repeatedly cautioned classicists against including films and other popular culture receptions in their curricula because "many of the films about antiquity… are neither important works of art nor complexly interesting" (2013: 176 and 2006: 11 for his earlier reservations). By contrast, Deborah Cartmell, working in adaptation studies, argues that video games, comic books and popular cinema "are all deserving objects of consideration and they can be approached from a variety of perspectives" (2012: 4). Determining the extent of the invasion of classical memes into the popular imagination, however, is a topic well worth investigating. Handled correctly it can also be a means of turning students into self-aware receivers of classical culture by using examples that are familiar to them in media that they regularly interact with. In today's visual culture and multimedia global world engaging closely with film and other popular receptions can be a way to turn passive consumers of information into more active and engaged viewers/readers, a key transferable skill, but also an important life skill.

Reflecting on my own agenda I have to pose the following questions. Am I simply seeing Electra everywhere because of my own research interest in the tragic heroine? Thinking more generally, how do personal frameworks shape and to a large degree determine an individual's reception process? And finally can unintended connections to a classical meme prove germane in the classroom? To address these questions I utilize "fuzzy" examples of the reception of Electra in popular culture (Hardwick 2011, 56–57), specifically Marvel's *Elektra*, as portrayed in the mainstream films *Daredevil* (2003)[11] and *Elektra* (2005), and Emily Thorne, the female avenger in the popular American series *Revenge* (2011–2015). As Hardwick argues, hazy, imprecise connections derive their power from "triggering readers' affective responses and shaping their constructions of meaning" (2011: 57).[12]

Daredevil's and *Elektra*'s heroine (played in both films by Jennifer Garner) is based on Frank Miller's comics from the 1980s,[13] so it is a cinematic adaptation of another type of source text. In terms of my chosen case studies, this popular culture character arguably bears a closer resemblance to the ancient Electra than the example I selected from the medium of television. Obviously Elektra's name itself is suggestive to anyone even vaguely familiar with the ancient story. There is even a knowing in-joke in *Elektra* about the heroine's connection to Greek tragedy. Upon hearing her name, the male lead Matt Miller (Goran Visnjic) asks "Elektra, like the tragedy"? The use of the Greek alphabet in the opening titles for the movie has already visually established the character's origins, as has the fact that she speaks (modern) Greek in *Daredevil.* These foreignizing elements highlight Elektra's difference, her otherness from mainstream American culture.

In terms of her narrative arc in *Daredevil* Elektra watches her father Nicholas (Erick Avari) be murdered and swears vengeance. At her father's Greek Orthodox funeral, she tells Matt Murdock, the man behind Daredevil's mask (Ben Affleck), "I want revenge." She refuses his offer of consolation and sets in motion a series of events that culminates in her own death. Her self-destructive course nearly costs Matt his life because she mistakenly thinks that he is her father's killer. She wounds him in a duel and takes off his mask, which conceals his identity from the world, with the words "I want to look into the eyes of my father's killer as he dies!" Elektra's obsession with revenge is portrayed as dangerous and nearly derails the hero's journey to a better understanding of his heroic mission. In spite of her warrior skills Elektra thus serves to reaffirm gender stereotypes. Her inability to control her emotions, contrasts sharply with Matt's male restraint. If Elektra embodies revenge, then Matt's decision not to kill the Kingpin (Michael Clarke Duncan), who was responsible for his own father's murder, demonstrates that, ultimately, he is more concerned with justice than retaliatory vengeance. Elektra's love interest, rather than her brother, is the rightful avenger in this story arc. Interestingly, writer/director Mark Steven Johnson thought that the revenge story of "Who got my girlfriend?" in the version of *Daredevil* that was shown in cinemas ended up derailing the movie.[14] In other words Elektra's storyline diverted attention from the focus on the male hero.

Elektra's cinematic storyline continues in *Elektra* (2005),[15] but it is the death of her mother that now drives the heroine. Resurrected, and after receiving further training as a warrior, Elektra is an assassin for hire in the beginning of the movie. Over the course of the film she is redeemed by her relationship with Abby, a young girl with special warrior skills whom she rescues and, in the process, avenges her own mother's murder. An interesting feature of this version of Elektra is her obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD),

an outward sign of her mental and emotional trauma. It is a condition she shares with Abby and this facilitates the development of a nurturing pseudo-mother–daughter relationship. Flashback scenes of her father's abusive behavior and her mother's murder, as well as of her resurrection, haunt her. The Sophoclean heroine is also haunted by her memories that end up affecting her physical wellbeing.

What the cinematic Elektra lacks in both films, but more so in the sequel, is the dangerous edge of her comic book counterpart. Frank Miller who created Elektra envisioned her as a worthy match for Daredevil and a "vengeful force." He was aware of her classical roots. In an interview included among the extras on the DVD of *Elektra* he reminisces about the origins of his creation: "such a good Greek myth from the House of Atreus, Agamemnon was her dad… she's got issues, and I just expanded upon that."[16] So is it simply all about her classical name? Greg Rucka, another graphic novel writer who worked on *Elektra* (2002), revealed in an interview:

> You don't name a character Elektra and then have her live a happy life. Names have power, and you don't name her after a tragic Greek figure… and then say she's happy. No, she is not… She is, I think, the most complicated character I've encountered in comics…[17]

In the mythical world of comics names do indeed matter. And as George Kovacs reminds us: "Images from Greco-Roman mythology and history permeate the comics medium… Understanding that connection enriches our appreciation of the comic book" (2011: 5). The conceptualization of Miller's Elektra as an anti-heroine whose desire for vengeance for the murder of her father leads her down a very dark path pays homage to the two strongest strands in Electra's reception in the modern era; her obsession with revenge and her near-identification with the act of mourning. The former trait plays a much more prominent role in comics and their screen adaptations. But the cinematic Elektra is not quite as dark and vengeful as her counterpart in comics, perhaps because studios thought that modern audiences would not be able to sympathize with the character otherwise: in spite of the principles outlined in the Production Code, mainstream movies have tended to prefer that audiences sympathize with the protagonists even when they pursue vengeance. For all her fighting ability the cinematic Elektra is a much softer version of her counterpart in comics and in Greek tragedy. As female avengers go, The Bride (Uma Thurman) in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003–2004) was a more potent vengeful force and a darker creation than Elektra, especially in Volume 1, released in 2003.

Revenge (2011–2015) was created by Mike Kelley for ABC Studios and starred Emily VanCamp as the female avenger.[18] The American series is the "announced" adaptation of another classic of world literature.[19] Kelley referred in interviews to his debt to Alexandre Dumas's novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*,[20] which he reimagined from the point of view of the wronged hero's child, turning her into a girl in the process (thus emphasizing once again the importance of names).[21] Emily Thorne's dedication to vengeance leads her to swap names with another woman, Amanda Clarke, so she can avoid detection and return to put into effect her plans for vengeance. The Grayson family's destruction of her father can work as a contemporary mirror of the ancient Electra. The show's popularity in its first season is largely due to the appeal of the revenge theme, especially revenge against the wealthy for their criminality and corruption. Grayson Global, the family-run empire, makes the Graysons members of the elite who maintain their status by unscrupulous means that do not preclude murder and terrorism. The setting of the series in the Hamptons, famous as the playground of the American rich, forms a suitable background to the revenge-driven plot—especially in its proximity to the sea, a symbol of the dark undercurrents that lie beneath this apparently idyllic community. The sea plays a key role throughout the series as exemplified by the turbulent waves that accompany the appearance of the title of the show.

Emily/Amanda is obsessed with revenge and nearly destroys herself in her ruthless pursuit of it. The Graysons framed her father David Clarke (James Tupper) for a terrorist attack on an airplane when Emily was but a young child. This backstory is revealed through flashbacks, which the audience is invited to piece together in order to understand the backdrop of this story of revenge. He was jailed and supposedly died in prison to cover up the Graysons' involvement with a shadowy organization called the Initiative. With the help of her father's friend Nolan Ross (Gabriel Mann) Emily implements her convoluted plans for revenge. Kelley left *Revenge* after its second season because he felt that maintaining the quality of the show within the twenty-two episodes framework of an American television series was impossible. Revenge, after all, can only be postponed for so long, as even Hamlet eventually came to realize. Emily's plans did indeed become more and more complicated as the plot was unbearably stretched out to the point that increasingly impossible situations were introduced, including the revelation that her father was actually alive in the final episode of the third season. This development deprived the show of much of its impetus and Emily of a key facet of her identity as the avenger.

There remain in *Revenge*, however, some interesting affinities with the ancient character and her story. Emily's inability to enter into a real relationship

with a man while she is consumed by thoughts of vengeance mirrors Electra's liminal position in Greek tragedy. Electra is denied marriage and children in Aeschylus's and Sophocles' dramas and is forced into a sterile union with the farmer in Euripides' *Electra*. Her aberrant unmarried/childless/pseudo-married state signals her difference. Emily marries Daniel (Josh Bowman), heir to the Greyson fortune, but it is only as a means of carrying out her plans to destroy the Grayson family from within. Emily even fakes a pregnancy in order to coerce Daniel into going through with their wedding. When he discovers the truth he shoots Emily in the abdomen on their wedding night. She survives her wounds and a fall into the sea, but is told that she can no longer have biological children. There is also a bitter rivalry between Emily and the pseudo-mother figure of Victoria Grayson (Madeleine Stowe) who at one time was her father's lover, and thus a potential stepmother to the young Amanda. In the time-honored tradition of American soaps Emily does get her happy ending, sailing away into the sunset with her childhood sweetheart Jack Porter (Nick Wechsler), but she admits that she knows she does not deserve it.

To return to Martindale's point that introduced this section, neither of these two deeply flawed films, nor the rather overwrought television series can be classed as "high" art. But what is both complex and interesting is our own relationship with the Greco-Roman classics that leads us to use them as a reference point and to make (or perhaps even force) connections. In a pedagogical setting it is important to encourage students to debate and make up their own minds as to whether there is indeed a connection to Electra, and if so what its precise nature might be. It discussing the relevance (or not) of such fuzzy examples of Electra's reception students can reflect on the reception process itself and begin to see themselves as active participants in the long history of the tragic heroine's reception.

Conclusion: The Pleasures and Uses of Intertextuality

Viewers and readers are always seeking to make connections and see patterns. Discovering the source(s) in a new context evokes "pleasure" (Inglis 2012: 327). Actively involving students in this search for patterns is a useful means of discussing the rich history of the reception of the classics. In practical terms, working with indirect film receptions in the classroom is most effective when discussed with groups of informed students.[22] A basis of familiarity with the Greek dramatic texts and their more direct receptions in film and television enables students to work more independently with the material rather than relying on exposition by the teacher. Some surprising and illuminating discussions can

arise from individual and group work on such receptions, so long as they adhere to the principle of allowing students to reach their own conclusions about how, where, when, and why classics permeate our modern visual culture.

Creative adaptations of the ancient Electra in the modern media of cinema and television (by no means limited to the six case studies examined in this chapter) offer us a wealth of examples with which to debate the different roles that antiquity can play in modernity, from new political readings of ancient stories to gender issues in mainstream movies. These can be mined in the classroom to reassess the role of ancient Greece and Rome in the global world of today, but also as a means to think about our own individual responses to these ancient cultures. To conclude on a more personal note, I am eagerly awaiting the next iteration of the classical Electra in film and television, as well as in other media, as they all add to and transform our relationship with the tragic heroine thus establishing her continued vitality. Returning to the title of Frank Miller's comic in which he resurrects his anti-heroine *Elektra Lives Again* (1990), it strikes me that it is less apt to talk about Electra's 'afterlife' and more accurate to think in terms of her new lease on life and her many new incarnations that transcend not only chronological but also media boundaries.

NOTES

1. Its UK title was *Of These Thousand Pleasures.* This is an interesting example of the instability of the titles of movies, especially when they are translated into different languages in an effort to promote a foreign movie among English-speaking audiences. The Italian title is a quotation from Giacomo Leopardi' poem "Le ricordanze." It was deemed unlikely that foreign audiences would recognize or respond to such a title even though one of the characters in the film both names and quotes extensively from the poem during a key scene.
2. Kamilla Elliott called the concept of fidelity "the bane of adaptation studies" (2013: 22). See also Cutchins (2014: 52).
3. Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene* (1976) forms the basis for many subsequent debates about the applicability of evolutionary models in the humanities. In his final chapter Dawkins suggested that human culture can be compared to the way genes behave. See Leitch (2013: 167).
4. The precise dating of Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra* plays is still hotly debated in classical scholarship. The former is currently dated to between 420 and 410 BC, while the latter to 422–413 BC.
5. For the difficulties in determining what the concept of revenge meant in ancient Greece and its associated vocabulary see McHardy (2008: 2–6).
6. A play that incidentally abounds with classical references as of course does the whole of Shakespeare's oeuvre. Shakespeare on film is an important test case in the field of adaptation studies: Sanders (2006, 45–46). Given the cultural capital with which Shakespeare's plays are invested, scholarship investigating their screen

adaptations serve as an important analogy to the debates surrounding the reception of Greek dramas on film.

7. To give it its full name the "Code to Govern the Making of Talking Synchronized and Silent Motion Pictures and the Reason Supporting it'. Formulated by the Association of Motion Picture Producers, Inc. and the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. (June 13, 1934).
8. For more information, see Hall (2004, 1–9; 18–26). Michael Cacoyannis's *The Trojan Women* (1971) and *Iphigenia* (1977) are two other prominent cinematic examples of this trend in the 1970s.
9. All quotations from the movie are based on the English subtitles provided by the American DVD version of the film: Facets Multimedia, Inc. (2003).
10. Michelakis argues that the film adds an ending to Sophocles' notoriously open-ended *Electra*, and replaces Euripides' *deus ex machina* resolution with a mechanical means of escape for its mortal protagonists (2013, 220). In any case the main effect of the scene with the red helicopter is the conflation of mythical and real time (the film's contemporary present). This is yet another means by which Jancsó deliberately alienates his audience and prevents them from becoming completely immersed in the act of watching the film.
11. Here I refer to the theatrical version of the movie and not the Director's Cut (2005) because this is the film that the majority of people saw.
12. It should be noted that Hardwick is referring to poetic receptions of classical texts and not to film, but her arguments can be extended to also apply to popular receptions.
13. *The Elektra Saga* (1981–1983), *Elektra Assassin* (1986–1987) and *Elektra Lives Again* (1990): see Miller and Sienkiewicz 2008.
14. In the featurette "Giving the devil his due – the making of *Daredevil* Director's Cut" included among the extras of the Director's Cut of *Daredevil* (2004).
15. The film borrows some elements from *Elektra and Wolverine, The Redeemer* comics written by Greg Rucka and illustrated by Yoshitaka Amano (2002). In this storyline, however, Elektra kills the girl's father and pursues her because she was a witness to this act of murder. In the end though, she decides to let her live.
16. In the featurette "Electra Incarnations – The ultimate super hero behind the scenes guide."
17. "Writing *Redeemer*: A conversation with Greg Rucka," interview by Jennifer Lee, included at the back of *Elektra and Wolverine: The Redeemer* (Rucka and Amano 2002, no page numbers).
18. For a useful summary of the character's arc see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_Thorne.Accessed October 29, 2015.
19. For adaptation as "an announced retelling of an originating text," see Bryant (2013: 48).
20. A novel that, as Arthur Pomeroy rightly points out, is full of classical references (2008: 10).
21. http://deadline.com/2012/06/revenge-creator-mike-kelley-serves-dish-enthusiasticallemmys-for-producer-mike-kelley-revenge-is-a-dish-served-enthusiastically-281356/.Accessed October 29, 2015.
22. I would like to thank all my students at UCL and Roehampton for helping me hone my pedagogical approach to indirect film receptions.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ancient World Documentaries

Fiona Hobden

Documentaries about ancient Greece and Rome share some basic qualities with the films and television programs studied elsewhere in this volume. At a formal level they comprise a series of images and sounds presented in a continuous flow. Sutured into sequence, these images and sounds acquire a forward-moving trajectory that creates narrative. However, as documentaries they possess a special conceit. The term "documentary" has its roots in the Latin verb *docere*, "to teach, instruct, inform, show, tell" (Lewis and Short 1879: 605; Crisell 2006: 65). Reflecting the full range of this definition, documentaries aim to be educational and evidential. Thus, ancient Greece and Rome on the documentary screen claims a deeper level of insight and a higher degree of veracity than other audio-visual representations. Through the use of established filming and editing techniques to create and order those images and sounds, documentaries present narratives about the history, society and culture of the ancient world that aim to be authoritative and convincing.

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the conventions of ancient world documentaries, to identify what they show and what they say. It is through this combination that documentaries "address" their public, generating ideas and meaning (Corner 1995), or in the present case knowledge and understanding of antiquity. In this endeavor, the oft-quoted description by John Grierson (1933: 8) of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" is helpful. Here "actuality" comprises the people, places and

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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objects captured on film.[1] Each documentary proposition about antiquity is crafted out of the raw materials of today. Yet, some of these raw materials have their origins in the ancient world: archaeological sites that were occupied more than 1500 years ago, and objects that were part of the lived environment of ancient Greeks and Romans. The continued presence of the "ancient" within the "modern" affords special opportunities for the creative treatment of ancient actualities. While Grierson's formulation points to the fabricated character of documentary "realities," ancient world content pushes this fabrication in distinctive directions. Thus, many techniques—voiceover narration, presenter address, expert witness interviews, on-location shooting, drama reconstruction—are familiar across the genre. However, the images that accompany narration (ancient artifacts), the identity of the presenter and their witnesses (ancient world specialists), the chosen locations (frequently archaeological) and the realization of the drama (in epic film style) are all defined by the content. On their account, ancient world documentaries possess a particular shape and color. Tracing the conventions of ancient world documentaries involves recognizing their underpinning mode and generic affiliations, but also the possibilities attendant upon their subject matter for developing their truth claims.

The conventions and possibilities of ancient world documentaries are further determined by their televisual character. By contrast to fictional stories about antiquity which appeared in early film, narratives claiming factual status developed on the small screen during the second half of the twentieth century, initially to meet the educational obligations of national public service broadcasters, and increasingly to serve commercial needs.[2] In terms of structure, ancient world documentaries are thus constrained by broadcasting requirements and industrial practices. For instance, every program must exactly fill its broadcasting slot. Not only will any story about antiquity need to fit that slot, but it will also be further segmented according to standard scene lengths and advertising breaks. This lends a program its rhythm and punch. In addition, the processes and technologies of filming, transmission, reception and viewing lend television an "immediacy" and "liveness" (Ellis 1982: 112). Documentary's audio-visual representations of ancient Greece and Rome are thus molded within a medium that offers seemingly unmediated access to reality, past or present. Furthermore, whether presenting fact or fiction, television aims to engage and entertain. Television sets the boundaries of and creates opportunities for ancient world documentaries, and so dictates their historiographical approach.

Before proceeding to the analysis, a few observations on the selection of programs are in order. To begin, there is no existing canon of documentaries

to draw upon. Although classicists and ancient historians are increasingly curious about the representation of their subjects on television, the ancient world is understandably peripheral to the interests of media specialists. Scholarly processes of sortation and evaluation are only just beginning. These processes are aided by the expanding range of programs available for study, due to the efforts of national broadcasters to make (a small portion of) historical and (a larger range of) current programs available on-line, the informal posting of television products on websites and the production of digital versions for a global marketplace. However, not every program is accessible to everyone. The programs discussed below are a selection of those available to a researcher working in a British university with access to open websites and national repositories (some by subscription only). The result is unavoidably eclectic and Anglophone; and following shifts in the volume of production that reflect the popularity and thus marketability of history today (Korte and Paletschek 2009), it tends towards the modern. However, in their conformity and diversity and in the range of stories told, the programs chosen for study are representative of trends and directions in ancient world documentaries. As a starting point and a spur to further research, the selection has value.

Authored Narratives—Narratives of Authority

In light of the underlying conceit of documentary to educate and to stand as evidence for the world it represents, it makes sense to begin by asking how ancient world programs advance these claims (and to some degree this question underpins much of this chapter). One answer lies in their narrative structure, that is to say the way audio-visual elements combine to tell a story. The flow of any program is established by the production team, the real authors of the work who build discrete elements into a coherent whole. For the viewer, however, direction is afforded either by an invisible "voice of god" narrator or a presenter who is seen and heard at various points during the program and who may also switch into voiceover. Through direct speech, both convey information that frames the images on screen (images in which the presenter may of course appear) and thereby control the narrative. In this basic way a story develops, anchored in the authoritative utterances of an omniscient narrator or a presenter who demonstrates their knowledge in person. However, although they serve the same underlying purpose—to direct and authorize—the narrator and presenter bear different relationships to other components in the audio-visual scheme: to artifacts and to expert witnesses. They thus contribute towards different styles of historiographical narration: they educate

and evidence the past in different ways. A comparison between two recent documentaries about the Roman emperor Caligula illustrates this well.

Caligula: 1400 Days of Terror (A&E, 2012) employs a professional voice artist as absent narrator, while *Caligula with Mary Beard* (Lion TV, 2013) is presenter-led. Both make extensive use of archaeological artifacts to complement the spoken delivery. For example, in each program busts and statues of Caligula provide an object of generic relevance to look at while the aspects of the emperor's career are detailed. In *Caligula with Mary Beard*, however, the eponymous presenter is shown visiting museums and standing in immediate proximity to the material remains of antiquity. Thus, towards the end of the program, a camera tracks Beard from above as she walks along a corridor lined with marble busts; at the same time in voiceover she describes the existence of an unusual sculpture of Claudius, Caligula's uncle and successor, at Rome's Centrale Montemartini museum. After coming to a stop in front of one bust and setting up a footstool, Beard, now in mid-close-up, begins a direct-to-camera address describing the bust's iconographical features. When she points out its strange forehead, the camera follows, as it does again when she climbs the footstool to look down on the bust from above. This personal interaction with the ancient material offers an opportunity for pointed analysis. The bust of Claudius is revealed to be a remodeled Caligula, and so it provides evidence for "the shifty awkwardness of the transition of power" that followed Caligula's assassination (52:00). Or more specifically, "it's a way of saying Caligula is obliterated and Claudius is now on the throne. *I have a sneaking suspicion* that it also says, actually, the new emperor is only the old emperor, with a re-cut face" (my emphasis) (56:00–56:21). In this scene, the presenter operates as an active interpreter of ancient evidence and architect of her own narrative. Personal analysis and authored interpretation is impossible for the disembodied narrator in *Caligula: 1400 Days of Terror*, who relies instead on statements of historical fact and rhetorical questions to propel the narrative forward.

A similar difference can be found in the deployment of expert witnesses. In *Caligula: 1400 Days of Terror* specialists in Roman history and archaeology, whose authority is signaled by their university status, stand, sit or crouch in fixed locations, talking straight-to-camera on topics ranging from Caligula's depraved sexual behavior to his brutal and humiliating treatment of senators, to his seemingly mad attempt to march against the northern sea. Segmented from one another, these expert witness statements are discrete interludes set within the narrator's overarching monologue. The presentation of historical information is multi-vocal, but coherence is accorded by the narrator, who identifies trends in the argument and remains in control of the overall trajectory. *Caligula with Mary Beard* also draws upon the knowledge

of established academics to build understanding of the emperor. However, each expert contribution takes the form of a dialogue between the presenter and her academic colleague. So, standing amid the columns outside the British Museum on a grey day, Mary Beard chats with Professor Greg Woolf of the University of St. Andrews about the problems of imperial succession and what that meant for Caligula (15:24–18:21). The forward and backwards movement of the conversation is emphasized by shot reverse shot camera work, by which both participants are seen to talk and listen in turn. In this sequence, and talking to other experts later in the program, the presenter plays an active role, drawing out key points from her expert witness and offering her own take, as a spur to further discussion. The storytelling in *Caligula with Mary Beard* is thus also multivocal and confined within a frame determined by the narrative. But it is a collaborative endeavor. Beard and Woolf "do history" together.

The difference between the voice of god narrator and the on-screen presenter thus resides in their absence and presence. Mary Beard does not simply transmit knowledge but actively participates in its creation on screen. In this she is aided by her wider persona. The Cambridge Professor of Classics brings the authority of her academic profession, recently extended into the arena of popular history, with her as she steps into every frame (see Hobden 2013b: 25–26). Although the voice of god narrator speaks from a position of omniscience, the presenter on the ground embodies authority. From this perspective, it is interesting to compare the overall narratives about Caligula that our two programs construct. *Caligula: 1400 Days of Terror* starts and ends by querying the emperor's reputed madness, but the sledgehammer repetition of the refrain "1400 days of terror" every time the program resumes following a commercial break (a reality for the television audience, but a fiction for the DVD viewer) makes this the essential quality of his reign. The lesson that "ultimate power corrupts" is played out with all the standard trademarks of Caligula's reign in twentieth-century popular culture (traced by Lindner 2013). *Caligula with Mary Beard* covers many of the same stories (for example, the party at which Caligula slept with a guest's wife, his supposed appointment of a horse as consul and the pleasure boats at Nemi), and yet it presents a more psychologically complex picture. Beard's Caligula is a young man who comes to power in an unpredictable and hostile environment, and whose arrogant, prickly and at times bloody behavior reflects this. This represents a deliberate attempt to refocus attention on the "man" rather than the "monster" (see 01:43–02:22). The take home message is not that Caligula behaved badly, but that removing tyrants by force (as Caligula replaced Tiberius, and Claudius replaced Caligula) does not guarantee an improvement in government. Now, it is certainly not the case that all

presenter-led documentaries pursue a revisionist line. However, with its opportunities for active discussion and personally authored analysis, presenter-led programs possess greater scope to question, rather than repeat orthodoxies, in a way that is timely or provocative. Television histories of ancient Greece and Rome may reproduce standard narratives or offer more radical reappraisals. The former, because of its familiarity (as we shall see below when considering drama reconstructions), may however appear more convincing.

Travels Through Antiquity

The positioning of narrators, presenters and expert witnesses within ancient world documentaries thus determines the structure and style of historical investigation, and advances a program's truth claim. The motif of travel plays a similar role. Since the Grand Tours of the eighteenth century, travel has offered opportunities to learn about the history of places visited. *Armchair Voyage: Hellenic Cruise* (BBC, 1958) was one of the first television series to harness this promise, aided by technologies which made mobile filming feasible.[3] Its principle innovations were to take history out of the recording studio and to invite the audience, sitting at home, to accompany the presenter Sir Mortimer Wheeler and the Hellenic Travellers' Club on an educational cruise.[4] *Armchair Voyage* thus anticipates several now familiar documentary trends: the use of on-location footage, the alignment of doing history with the process of traveling (addressed by Wyver, forthcoming), and the conflation of the historical with the touristic gaze. It is worth, therefore, taking a closer look at this series, before exploring the significance of travel in more recent ancient world documentaries.

Traveling is imbedded in the title and format of *Armchair Voyage: Hellenic Cruise.* Episode 1 begins with Wheeler embarking upon a train to join his fellow passengers on a cross-channel ferry and then catch an overnight train to Venice, to take in St. Mark's and enjoy a gondola trip, before catching the cruise ship Mediterranean ("by sea we all went," 01:06). Throughout the series, shots of the presenter and other passengers on deck, rolling waves and a forward-forging prow sustain the "voyaging" premise. In addition, the trajectory of each episode corresponds to a leg of the cruise—"Mycenae to Venice," "Istanbul and the Islands" and "Delos to Athens"—while the delivery of historical information is tied to the rhythms of the cruise: the stopping points and the talks provided by guest lecturers, a hallmark of the Hellenic Cruise experience. Like the travelers who are dropped off at archaeological sites and modern-day towns—"the ship disgorged us," Wheeler reports of their arrival at Lesbos, "As an experience it seemed almost unreal"

(episode 2, 03:10)—the television viewer is presented with a series of places to "visit" and sights to see. A consequence of this structure is that the account of ancient Greek civilization is episodic, developed discretely and in sequence according to the travel route. For example, the Olympic Games are the obvious topic of discussion on route to and at the site of Olympia (episode 1, 12:20–15:35), and ancient town planning and housing fall under consideration at Priene (episode 2, 11:26–11:48), while Greek theatrical acoustics are discussed and briefly witnessed at Epidaurus (episode 3, 07:18–08:30). The result is a series of location-based insights that individually and cumulatively illuminate aspects of ancient Greece.

The sense in which the viewer becomes a virtual tourist is enhanced by Wheeler's voiceover contributions at each archaeological site. At every staging point, Wheeler acts like a virtual tour guide. In episode 3, for instance, he directs attention to Roman merchant houses on Delos, describing them as "worth looking at" (03:40), while at Athens he suggests where to stand on the Acropolis for a good view of the agora (21:20). The camera and the viewer duly follow. From the vantage point of the Acropolis he also points out where "down there" Socrates and St. Paul were once active (19:58), filling the broken archaeological space with famous men, conjuring events from the past as the viewer looks on in the present. Then again, on the few occasions Wheeler appears in person on site, he acts like a substitute tourist. At one merchant house, he is captured entering the doorway and looking round. The camera follows his gaze down towards the mosaic floor, so the viewer sees what he sees. The subsequent series of images extend the illusion, subjecting other floor decorations, the surrounding space and columns to the touristic gaze (04:06). At these moments, when the eye of the viewer aligns with what the camera sees, television's conceit of offering unmediated access to reality is particularly strong. Although sitting at home, watching black and white images on a small screen, the viewer might nonetheless feel as if they are there. In fact, their experience is more privileged than that of the average tourist, for the camera can zoom and pan; combined with footage filmed from the air and high vantage points the viewer's gaze is near panoptic. At sites from which other tourists are frequently absent, the television viewer can see in greater detail and broader perspective than visitors on the ground.

In *Armchair Voyage: Hellenic Cruise*, the travel that determines the historical investigation and establishes touristic encounters is that of the cruise. *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great* (Maya TV/BBC/PBS, 1998) invites the viewer along on a more personalized trip. "This is the story of a twenty thousand mile journey in search of one of the greatest figures in history,"

begins episode 1, as men on horseback ride hard across an arid plain (00:00–00:18). One of these men, it will soon become clear, is the presenter Michael Wood. *In the Footsteps* thus records Wood's story, as he travels from Macedon, following the route of Alexander and his troops in their conquest of the former Persian Empire and beyond in 334–323 BCE. During this journey, Alexander's story emerges in two ways. First, events in his life are narrated by Wood from evocative locations: amidst the remains of the theatre at Verghina where his father Philip II was murdered (08:17–08:42); at the archaeological site of Hisarlık-Troy (11:14–12:23), which Alexander visited before launching his campaign; and at a night-club in Bodrum, described as a good place to imagine the drunken exploits of Macedonian soldiers nearby (18:13–19:03), to give some early examples from the first episode. At such sites, the presenter is often on the move, pausing only to deliver historical information straight to camera. Emphatic gestures and a focused gaze bring intensity to already dramatic narratives. In the mediaeval fortress of the Knights Hospitaller at Bodrum, the effect is enhanced by night-time shooting in a long room lit only by torches, and Wood's staging of an imagined dialogue between Alexander's worried enemies, under siege in Halicarnassus (19:16–20:15). This re-enactment, in which Wood switches seamlessly between roles, illuminates their concerns and brings emotion and tension. It also adds a sense of realism, with today's castle offering a proxy setting for a war-room conversation that "must have happened" in some shape or form within the ancient city.

Secondly, the physical re-enactment of Alexander's journey generates insights into the king's experience and character. By and large, Wood travels using modern transport: by train, a small boat, tractor, a larger sailing vessel and bus in episode 1 alone. Although fetishized through extended sequences and the intruding sounds of motor engines or lapping waves (for example), the presenter's journey is not an exact replication of Alexander's. Nonetheless, consonance is suggested in the psychology of both men as they set out: "The journey would take us almost as far as China," reminisces Wood in voiceover as he stands looking out of a train window, the Macedonian countryside passing by. "For much of it we had no idea what to expect. Nor perhaps did he" (09:09–09:22). Undertaking re-enactment enables the television presenter to hypothesize the mindset of the Macedonian king, framed by his own experience. Similarly, wading along the coast in choppy chest-high water, navigating jagged rocks of the Asia Minor coast with his rucksack held aloft (Figure 22.1a), leads Wood (again reflecting in voiceover) to draw conclusions about Alexander, a short non-swimmer who became trapped with his troops in the water at the same headland when attempting a shortcut:

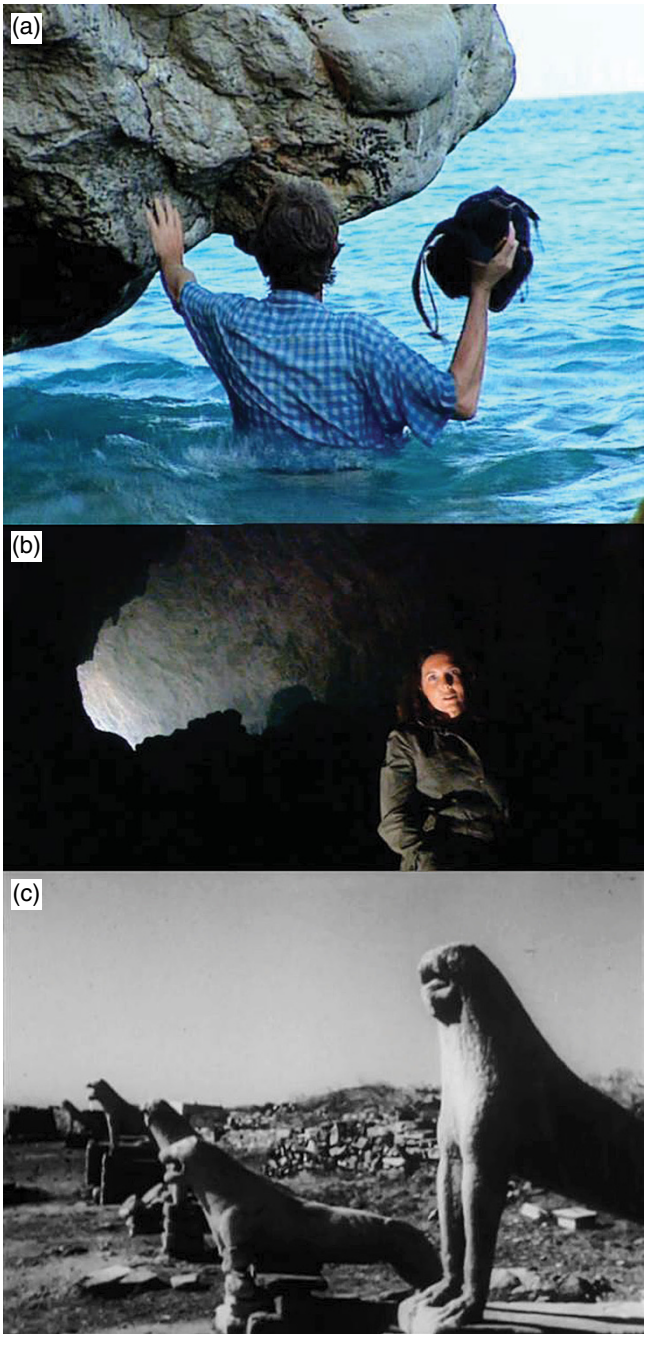

Figure 22.1 (a) Michael Wood, *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great*; (b) Bettany Hughes, *The Minoans*; (c) The lions from Naxos at Delos, *Armchair Voyage: Hellenic Cruise*.

> I learned three things about Alexander that day: that he didn't always think things out ahead, that he was an obstinate man, and also, and most important of all, he was lucky. That beach walk was the first hint that going precisely in his footsteps might reveal more than just where he'd been (23:55).

Now the presenter acts as proxy; his travails match, on a limited scale, those of Alexander. His re-enactment and narration of Alexander's story is supplemented by knowledge available only through direct, physical imitation. Wood's personal experience offers insights into Alexander the person.

In these re-enactments, Wood is a central mediating force, telling stories with passion and enthusiasm, physically mimicking episodes from Alexander's life and authoritatively constructing insights on their basis. While Wood's travels already underpinned *In Search of the Trojan War* (BBC, 1985), here they align not with the exploits of archaeologists like Heinrich Schliemann, who are also looking for Troy, but with the adventures of the historical subject. This enables apparently direct insights into the past, through the present-day activities of the presenter. The impression of accessibility, however, is complicated by frequent encounters with local people in modern settlements. As he travels, over a cup of coffee or on the road, Wood listens to their stories about Alexander and solicits their knowledge, showing the longevity of the conqueror in the culture and imagination of the regions he passed through. But one effect of the many lingering close-ups of dark weather-beaten faces and scene-setting shots of people playing games in cafes, enjoying musical entertainments, or working the land, is to make local inhabitants into a foreign and exotic spectacle. This is another aspect of the tourist gaze, familiar especially at the time of broadcast from the Michael Palin travelogues, *Around the World in 80 Days* (BBC, 1989), *Pole to Pole* (BBC, 1992) and *Full Circle* (BBC, 1997).[5] Certainly, in *Armchair Voyage: Hellenic Cruise* footage of traditional dancing by girls on Lesbos (04:45), a man and his bear at Priene (12:05) and a dark-faced man drinking from a well at Delos (03:50) creates a similar effect. However, the conceit that Michael Wood goes where Alexander went transforms modern-day people into substitutes for inhabitants of the region over 2,000 years ago. The past is thus shaded through the present with an ethnographic hue.

The blurring of past and present is taken a step further in programs that purport to venture backwards in time. *The Greeks: A Journey in Space and Time* (BBC, 1980) received its subtitle, says producer Christopher Burstall, because "from the outset [it] seemed to me like a journey of exploration" (Dover 1980: viii). This program did indeed use footage from numerous locations in the Aegean, but, significantly, the intellectual exercise is cast as a journey, one that not just crosses space but takes the viewer back in time.

The time-traveling approach to television history is more extensively applied in *The Minoans* (Lion TV, 2004), which establishes in its opening sequence a question and a method by which to find an answer:

> So where did the Greeks get the story of a flesh-eating bull man lurking in a dark menacing labyrinth? To answer that question, you have to *journey far into the past*, fifteen hundred years before the Parthenon was built, way before Homer's time, back 5,000 years to an extraordinary time and place, to Bronze Age Crete and the island of the Minoans. (my emphasis) (01:47)

This is a journey that presenter Bettany Hughes promises to take: "The journey I'm going on now will take us to the very heart of this strange world" (04:05). In reality, of course, it is a journey through present-day Crete, but one that nonetheless offers insights. "*Travel around*, and you understand why Crete has been such a fertile breeding ground for tales of derring-do, love and sex, blood and gore. Anything seems possible here," or "If you want to understand how the sea shaped the destiny of Minoan civilization, *this is the place to come*" (my emphases) (05:38; 52:09–52:15). In each instance, being in the present enables recognition of past conditions. Often these conditions are sensory rather than factual. For example, visiting Knossos, and wandering through columned rooms, the presenter (in voice-over) goes so far as to suggest how visitors would have experienced being there: "You feel you're being taken on a journey that's expressly designed to beguile and seduce as well as bewilder and confuse" (20:55–21:03). Traveling brings insights into the psychological and physiological responses of ancient visitors to the places where Hughes now walks through her personal responses. Hughes's presence on screen stands as testament to her spoken statement. Furthermore, viewers are invited to join the presenter in her impressionistic reconstruction. Standing in the depth and shadows, she observes "A cave like this is eerie enough. You can hear the stalactites growing. Faces and features leap out at you from the rocks. Just imagine what visions you'd have seen if you'd shared in the mind-altering gift of the goddess" (1:17:37–1:17:53; Figure 22.1b). Journeying back in time, through the landscapes of the present, involves imagining yourself into the past, to feel what a Minoan might have felt, based on the presenter's described experience. It is telling that when discussing her own practice Hughes praises television programs that replicate the intention of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars to produce histories that help readers feel as if "they could have 'been there'" (Hughes 2009: 14). This televisual conceit extends beyond the impression viewers of *Armchair Voyage* might have of being there amidst the ruins, with members of the cruise. In addition, the insights

Michael Wood professed to glean into the mind and character of Alexander the Great by re-enacting his journey is broadened to an appreciation of the general experiences of individuals and communities who once occupied the places Hughes now frequents. This is history understood as experience. In adopting this approach, ancient world documentaries correspond to broader trends in popular history (see Hobden 2013b: 31–33).

Today, traveling is almost *de rigeur* in historical documentaries.[6] Even when financial constraints, accessibility issues or production preferences mean that a traveling presenter is undesirable, a touristic gaze is still formulated through expositions by experts in relevant locations (as in *Caligula: 1400 Days of Terror*) or stock footage of historical sites. Indeed, programs like *The Treasures of Athens and Olympia* (First Freedom/Allfilm, 2005) make a virtue out of this gaze, hiding historical content behind a title promising direct access to the art and architecture of those ancient locations (the DVD dust jacket makes explicit mention of tourists, museums and archaeological sites). The fact that traveling leads inevitably to archaeological spaces has one striking consequence: the ancient world is forever viewed through the prism of its ruins. The implications are twofold. First, ruins carry longstanding associations with decline and decay (Macaulay 1953). For poets and painters since the Enlightenment, broken stones testify to the end of the society that erected them. They thus set that society at a distance and convey pathos. This traditional reading is well illustrated by *Armchair Voyage: Hellenic Cruise*, during the visit to Delos in episode 3. In Wheeler's estimation, Delos is a site "untidy with the relics of gods and men," a former center of Greek worship marked now by "desolation" (01:07, 01:36). The point is emphasized by an unattributed and adapted quotation from Byron's 1813 poem *The Giaour*: "two or three lonely columns merely remind us how 'decay's effacing fingers have swept the lines where beauty lingers'" (02:40–02:48); and, amongst more extensive footage of the windswept site, by a sustained thirty second shot of the lions from Naxos who "have stayed on oblivious to the departure of their gods" (02:00) (Figure 22.1c). The lions may stand impervious to the passing of time, but its impacts are all too visible. The story to be told at Delos is one of decline and decay.

And yet, secondly, as this rhetoric illustrates, those very stones have longevity: once part of the ancient living world, they are now part of ours. Their physical presence thus makes the past tangible. This effect underpins on-site re-enactments of the type encountered in *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great*. The narrative of Alexander's visit to the oracle of Apollo at Didyma, for example, acquires greater resonance because it is overshot by the presenter walking amongst the ruins there. Although, or perhaps because of

their state of disrepair—especially given the mention of the sack of the sanctuary by the Persians—the great temple columns attest to Alexander's journey in antiquity, as they provide the setting for Wood's rambling now (episode 1, 15:20–16:16). At such moments, archaeology authenticates the program's historical claims. This is facilitated by the longstanding representational strategies of visual artists from painters to theatrical set designers to filmmakers, for whom ancient Greece and Rome are signified by columns and pediments, restored versions of ancient architectural forms reconstructed from the remains of buildings and monuments at archaeological sites (García Morcillo, Hanesworth and Lapeña Marchena 2015: 6–8). Television documentaries replay this archaeological aesthetic, constructing an environment that is authentic, according to the principle that archaeology equals antiquity (see Hobden 2013a). Traveling affects not just how a story is told, but how ancient Greece and Rome appear on screen.

Dramatizing Antiquity

The representational strategies of ancient world documentary explored so far might be described as allusive. Documentary programs tell stories about ancient Greece and Rome through authorized narration, supported by visual cues. However, documentaries also depict moments from "real life"—in ancient word documentaries, moments in ancient history—using the conventions of drama, as a theatrical and cinematic practice. As factual television, dramatized documentary (or documentary drama) has been much contested, for the basic reason that it adopts a format characteristic of fiction (see Woodhead 2005). Going back to Grierson's "creative treatment of actuality," documentaries unavoidably fabricate. Like any other feature, drama's mimetic representations play a constructive role in the educational and evidential pursuit.

Drama reconstruction involves the filming of actors in costume on set or on location following stage directions and scripts. In its simplest version, the action is compact and supplements a program's spoken narrative. Thus, in *The Spartans* (2003), men dressed in military attire appear whenever Spartan military escapades, techniques and maneuvers fall under scrutiny. In one scene, while voiceover presenter Bettany Hughes reads aloud verses attributed to Tyrtaeus, the camera scans the ranks of soldiers standing to attention, as if listening to the exhortations of the poet and making ready to attack Messenia (14:52–15:25). In another, as Hughes describes the weaponry and tactics of the citizen hoplite soldier, one such individual tightens his leather cuirass, pulls on a greave, readies his sword, places a

Figure 22.2 (a) A Spartan warrior readies for battle, *The Spartans*; (b) "A cold-hearted killer" in extreme close-up, *Cleopatra: Portrait of A Killer*; (c) Verus prepares to enter the arena, *Colosseum: Rome's Arena of Death*; (d) Martin Sheen as Nero, *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of An Empire*.

plumed helmet on his head, binds his arms and grasps his shield and spear, before finally turning to shake that spear at the camera with a battle cry (15:54–16:34; Figure 22.2a). Similar set pieces continue, as phalanx tactics are described (17:27–19:56), and, having featured during discussion of Thermopylae in the prologue, they reappear at intervals across the program, whenever attention falls on war. The drama reconstruction is thus illustrative: it shows while the presenter tells. Furthermore, dramatized segments are frequently introduced and followed by images of hoplite soldiers in ancient Greek sculpture and vase painting, whose postures they echo. Particularly strikingly, as the phalanx sequence ends, a soldier fallen on the battlefield with his arm out-stretched morphs exactly into a sculpted warrior, demonstrating what happened when "things got deadly" (19:43–19:47). The convergence of drama reconstruction and artifact iconography lends the former veracity, and together they support the spoken narrative. Drama here advances *The Spartans*'s truth-claim.

These illustrative and authenticating effects are enhanced when the drama is extended to set-piece action, as in *Cleopatra: Portrait of A Killer* (Lion TV, 2009). The program's premise is that bones found by archaeologists at Ephesus in an octagonal tomb belong to Arsinoe, killed on the orders of her sister Cleopatra in 41 BCE. To support this claim, the documentary combines a narrative of discovery and investigation by archaeologists Hilke Thür and Fabian Kanz with a historical narrative of events at Egypt and Ephesus that led ultimately to Arsinoe's death. That historical narrative is conveyed through dramatic reconstruction, presented in two tiers. The first details events leading to Arsinoe's death. Despite the opening promise to show "Cleopatra as you've never seen her before" (01:40), the *mise-en-scène* is thoroughly familiar. There are billowing oriental fabrics, tall columns, linen tunics, Roman soldiers and in one scene Cleopatra and Mark Antony recline, feeding one another grapes. Cleopatra and Arsinoe both have long black hair, and their eyes are lined with kohl in typical "Egyptian" style. Somewhat ironically, at the moment uniqueness is announced, Cleopatra is shown in profile wearing a bird-beaked diadem reminiscent of the comic headdress worn by Amanda Barry in *Carry on Cleo* (Gerald Thomas, 1964) in parody of Elizabeth Taylor's elaborate costume in *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963). But while the look conforms to standard models and so confirms the veracity of the portrait, this is not "classic" drama. The action is developed in discrete episodes intercut with on-location shooting (for example, at archaeological sites, a scientific laboratory, a museum) and filmed almost entirely without dialogue. Meaning is primarily achieved in tandem with the voiceover.

This voiceover is provided not only by the presenter, Neil Oliver, but "Cassius Dio," who appears in a second tier of drama reconstruction. The Roman historian is played by Ian McNeice, whose "Roman" credentials on television include playing Batiatus in the tele-movie *Spartacus* (dir. Robert Dornhelm, 2004) and (appropriately, as a public speaker) the herald in the series *Rome* (BBC/HBO, 2005–2007). In his first scene, having received guests into his Roman villa, Cassius Dio describes the murder of Arsinoe on Cleopatra's instructions. Gesturing emphatically, his timbre-filled voice conveys emotion. The camera captures his reclining companions watching intently, captivated by the performance. This scene serves to introduce the character and establish his authority, bookmarked as it is by statements that "In the Roman accounts she [Hilke Thür] found reference …" and "These words by Roman historian Cassius Dio …" (05:57–06:52). Later, his storytelling is interspliced with and runs over the "Egyptian" drama. The exile of Cleopatra by her brother Ptolemy and sister Arsinoe, her seduction of Julius Caesar, their joint attempt to take the city, Arsinoe's revolt against Caesar at

the Pharos lighthouse, the parade of a defeated Arsinoe at Rome and her exile to Ephesus, Cleopatra's negotiations with Mark Antony and the murder of Arsinoe: all are described with feeling. The effect is two-fold. First, the drama involving Cleopatra and Arsinoe is given credence by the evidential status of Cassius Dio's description, which itself is "authenticated" by its "Roman" actor, and the costumes and setting of the Roman banquet (complete with servant delivering grapes). And secondly, in the absence of dialogue, Cassius Dio heightens the emotion: filmed in close-up, he adopts a somber expression to convey the pity Romans felt for Arsinoe when they saw her (as we also see her) in chains (39:53), for example. At points Neil Oliver also narrates alongside Cassius Dio in voiceover and on-screen close-up. However, in his role as the ancient historian Ian MacNeice outlines historical events with the depth and intensity possible for a trained Shakespearean actor.

The intertwining of the two dramatic strands strengthens the evidential status of Cleopatra's and Arsinoe's tale, giving it equal priority to the "scientific" arguments presented by the expert witnesses. Following Cassius Dio's first performance, Oliver remarks: "If Cassius Dio was right [that Arsinoe was murdered at Ephesus] and if Hilke had stumbled on the bones of Arsinoe, then this was a huge find" (06:53). The "Egyptian" drama re-enacts Cassius Dio's testimony and makes it seem more likely that Hilke's bones are Arsinoe, even though the two propositions are mutually exclusive: the identification of the skeleton with Arsinoe is not a necessary inference.[7] In this respect, the extended drama reconstruction acts not only as illustration but testimony: the events visualized "really happened." It thus serves the rhetorical ends of *Cleopatra: Portrait of A Killer*, directing attention away from the contentiousness of its underlying proposition.

The characterization of Cleopatra through the drama reconstruction contributes in a similar way. Mimicking "true crime" writing, such as the 1986 film *Henry: Portrait of A Killer*, directed by John McNaughton or novelist-turned-researcher Patricia Cornwell's *Jack the Ripper: Portrait of A Killer* (2003), the program sets itself up as an exposé on Cleopatra as murderer. As the drama unfolds, this is sustained in two interrelated ways. First, Cleopatra is presented as a *femme fatale*, fulfilling the gender conventions of film noir.[8] This is effected by Oliver's voiceover allusions to the deleterious effects on her family of a woman with "a calculating mind," "a woman willing and able to do whatever was required to get her what she wanted" (16:45–16:51; see also "a calculated act of betrayal," 17:02; "stabbing her brothers and sister Arsinoe in the back," 18:30). The scene underpinning this characterization, however, is not the murder of her brothers and sisters, but Cleopatra's seduction of Julius Caesar. When Julius Caesar catches sight

of the beautiful young woman walking towards him down the stairs, coming to beg at his knees, his straight-to-camera gaze is troubled. By contrast, Cleopatra's expression turns from sultry to amused when her brother, king Ptolemy, finds his exiled sister in Caesar's bed and flees (17:35–19:02). Cleopatra is a deadly seductress, who manipulates the Roman general into supporting her right to the throne with violence and murder. Caesar himself will not become a victim of her manipulations (as might be expected for the man who succumbs to a *femme fatale*), but later Mark Antony will join her in a final bid for supreme power, and both of them will die. This narrative is, of course, the ancient narrative, but the drama reconstruction offers a sophistic portrayal of Cassius Dio's account. It visualizes the premise of Cleopatra's culpability by highlighting the interior emotions of both parties in the seduction scene. The facial expressions of the actors provide a visual language code that strengthens the program's claims about Cleopatra. Any motive Caesar might have had for supporting Cleopatra other than a middle-aged man's lust for a nubile young woman is conveniently elided, and likewise Cleopatra's bid to seize power, which might seem legitimate in light of her earlier expulsion, is cast as the machinations of a devious woman.

Frequent filming of Cleopatra in extreme close-up (ECU), so that a portion of her face fills almost the entire screen, reinforces the effect. This standard technique for representing villains (see Fiske 1987: 7) is deployed across the program, and most tellingly in the prologue. Half-way through the prologue an ECU of Cleopatra's face (restricted to her lower forehead, eyes and the top of her nose) accompanies the voiceover description of Cleopatra as "a cold-hearted killer" (00:35; Figure 22.2b). As the segment draws to a close with the statement "This is the portrait of a killer," a close portrait of Cleopatra (forehead to chin) segues into a single eye shot, over which the program title appears (02:07–02:11). The exact same sequence concludes the program. When Cleopatra appears in between, the connotations are already established. And they are replayed later, when tight shots of Cleopatra's eyes bracket the scene depicting her younger brother's murder (45:08, 46:16), and ECUs permeate the conversations with Mark Antony which lead Cleopatra to propose her sister's murder (48:27, 48:48, 49:57). Cleopatra's "evil eye" is an abiding and watchful presence that confirms her villain status. Of course extreme close-up is also a signature shot and the gaze a weapon of Hollywood's *femmes fatales*. Again, the narrative implications are sustained through the drama.

In *Cleopatra: Portrait of A Killer*, drama reconstruction is simultaneously illustrative and evidential. The drama underpinning *Colosseum: Rome's Arena of Death* (2003) serves similar purposes. However, it attests not to grand historical events, but the experiences of its protagonist, the

gladiator Verus. The opening sequence exemplifies the approach. Scanning a group of gladiators as they put on armor, the camera comes to rest on one man and then follows him into the arena. At the same time, an absent narrator explains that during the Colosseum's inauguration the performance of one gladiator drew the attention and acclaim of a Roman poet. As the newly armed gladiator walks along a darkened corridor, the narrator remarks, "Verus' words and actions in this film are based on the latest historical evidence on the lives of the gladiators" (00:43–00:50). And as he stands ready: "This is Verus, and this is his story" (00:54–00:58). Verus is one amongst many, representative of the wider group, but possessing experiences that are singular. This personal dimension is facilitated further by the provision of a second voiceover by actor Ross Kemp, whose renown for hard-man roles on British television makes him a distinctive and appropriate voice for Verus.[9] Dialogue between characters in *Colosseum* is limited to brief exchanges in untranslated Latin, so Kemp's character voiceover not only helps the viewer make sense of events (in tandem with the authoritative narrator), but also offers insights into Verus's character and motivations. Working as a slave quarrying stone for the amphitheater in which he will eventually fight, Verus reports on the physical experience—"it felt as if you were being baked alive" (02:58)—and shows his own strength of body and mind—"they didn't break me" (03:16)—but also attests to the deleterious effects of working in that environment: after ten months "I started to lose hope" (05:28). The general experience of being a quarry slave is illustrated through the hard labor shown at length on screen, with men pushing carts, carrying baskets laden with stones, working wheels and chipping away at the rock-face in dry conditions (02:27–03:24, 04:54–05:33). The impacts on each individual in the scene are focalized through Verus, whose stamina nonetheless gives way to despair, but whose desperation also motivates him to start a fight with another slave in a bid to impress a visiting lanista ("This had to be my way out of the pit," 06:16).

Along the way, Verus has various life experiences: following the destruction of his village by Roman soldiers and his enslavement in the quarries he is taken to train and fight as a gladiator at Rome. He swears the oath and passes his test, only to lose his first fight; then, having demanded and won a second fight, and so become a gladiator, Verus finds himself attending the funeral of a fallen comrade, being forced to fight and kill at a party hosted by elite Romans, rescuing the widow of his departed colleague from a fire, fighting his friend Priscus during the Colosseum's inaugural games, winning his freedom when they reach a draw and setting out on the long road home to Moesia. *This* is Verus's story. However, despite the personal insights, the drama is deeply reminiscent of every gladiator story ever told. Elements of

the quarry scene sketched above replicate the arid setting where slaves labor "under whip and chain and sun" in the film *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960) (08:28–08:30), as does the visit of a lanista recruiting suitable slaves for his gladiatorial school. In addition, the climactic confrontation between Verus and his friend Priscus provides a happier resolution to the problem faced by Draba when he has Spartacus at the end of a spear (a moment of rebellion in *Spartacus* the film); or by Spartacus when he defeats his best friend Varro in the arena (a moment of self-sacrifice by Varro, in STARZ's 2010 series *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, episode 10). Then again, Verus's discomfort following his performance at the party resonates with Maximus's challenge—"Are you not entertained?"—to the arena audience in *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), in its questioning of the ethics of gladiatorial competition (see Winkler 2005). Finally, Verus's motivation—to gain his freedom and return to his family—is also reminiscent of *Gladiator*; on winning freedom for the Romans from the tyranny of empire, Maximus joins his family, albeit in death.

In short, the personal experiences established for Verus through the drama reconstruction and first-person narration are remarkably generic. His individual story does indeed represent the wider experience of gladiators in ancient Rome, as it is popularly conceived. For this reason creative director Laurence Rees, quoted in the official BBC press pack, seems overly optimistic when he hopes that "after watching this film most people's perceptions of what life was like for gladiators in ancient Rome will be fundamentally changed."[10] Indeed, the efficacy of the drama reconstruction lies not in novelty or originality, but recognizability. If they have watched any gladiator films at all, a viewer of the opening scene, in which Verus receives his armor, walks by torchlight along a darkened corridor and emerges from the gladiatorial underworld into the light, already knows the plot (Figure 22.2c) (see Junkelmann 2004: 232–223). This pre-conditioning bolsters the drama's evidential status. Realized in dramatic form, the historical information offered by the narrator—nuggets which might be genuinely new to viewers—appears convincing due to the familiarity of the drama in which they are enacted. Through the story of Verus, *Colosseum: Rome's Arena of Death* presents a generically authentic personal experience.

The interplay between documentary's dramatized antiquities and those of film and television is even stronger in *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of An Empire* (BBC/Discovery Channel/ZDF, 2006). Although dramatic episodes are still framed within a voice of god narration, they are "classic" in execution and editing. Boasting an impressive cast of established British actors, the drama reconstruction of events at Rome during the reign of six emperors bears all the hallmarks of high quality BBC costume drama, matching,

for example, *I, Claudius* (BBC, 1976) and *Rome* in setting, staging, script-writing and actor pedigrees. Fully realized, the drama introduces an element of multivocality. The return of Caesar to Rome in episode 1 is a case in point. Caesar's political ambitions are first hinted at during a terse conversation with Mark Antony and Labienus on the battlefield following victory at Alesia ("my service to Rome has only just begun," 08:20–08:45), then elaborated during a speech to the troops inviting them to help him "restore Rome to its people" (08:57–10:25), and refined when Caesar describes Rome's need for "strong leadership" while receiving a massage (15:40–16:40). Labienus's response in each scene—looking on with narrowed eyes and eventually asking whether Caesar wishes to reform or overthrow Rome—mark these ideas as potentially suspect. Meanwhile the counter-position of senators is established through short speeches in the senate by Cato and Marcellus branding Caesar a self-interested criminal intent on seizing power (11:23–12:05). The exchanges between characters create a conversation on Caesar's plans, explaining how civil war arises. Although no judgment is made by the accompanying narrator, a flash forward to a night-time scene of men with knives (16:45–16:53) anticipates Caesar's eventual demise. Overall, the program remains uneasy with Caesar's ambitions and accomplishments, shortcutting from the victory at Pharsalus in 48 BCE to his murder in 44 BCE in a matter of minutes. However, an evaluation of the transformation of empire which Caesar's rule is said to initiate may be hinted at during a closing synopsis that looks forward to the series' next episode: "Emperor Nero: fire, murder, madness" (57:53). Sean Pertwee's steely-eyed Caesar, willing to pursue his "reforms" at any cost (a cost counted in bloody battle scenes), encourages a judgment from which the voiceover holds off.

The series' second episode, devoted to Nero, illuminates the further potential of full dramatic reconstruction to develop a historical perspective. The emperor is introduced as "famously eccentric" (00:26), but embodied by British screen and theater actor Martin Sheen, Nero increasingly possesses a terrifying madness. A wide-eyed enthusiasm for rebuilding Rome and the arts progresses to red-faced shouting in the bath (when Seneca withdraws from Nero's service, 17:45–17:55), to frantic hammering at the eye of a mosaic (in frustration at imperfections and delays in the rebuilding of Rome, 22:58–23:20), to wild-eyed terror, hyperventilation and shouting (on the revelation of conspiracy: "I want them all to die!" 30:22–30:34). Exhilaration following his stage performance transforms into hurt, extreme violence, curtain tearing and groaning remorse (when Nero murders his wife Poppaea, 36:27–38:37), then tearful rage (at the senate when his building project flounders, 40:12–41:32), Dionysian ebullience (at a sex-filled symposium in Greece, 42:07–42:11), profound seriousness (as a young slave is castrated to

replace his wife and senators are forced to commit suicide, 44:02–46:21), coquettish happiness (as the dead senators' inheritances pour in and the new Poppaea cavorts in the garden, 46:52–47:50), bright-eyed tear-filled anticipation (as Nero imagines conquering the Gauls with song, 50:40–51:57), uncertainty and fear (at dissolving support, 55:15–55:25) and finally into knowing sadness (when reality hits home and Nero prepares for suicide, 55:46–57:43). Across these emotion-filled episodes, Sheen's expressive face conveys Nero's mounting psychological instability (Figure 22.2d). Fully realized, with a carefully paced score and minimum voiceover intervention, the drama reconstruction is entrancing, leading the viewer through the highs and lows and horrors of the emperor's life to witness his changing mental state, as he acts like, comes to believe and finally questions whether he is a god. The historical proposition that Nero's reign descends into madness, endangering the stability of the empire, is substantiated in every scene.

The drama reconstruction of *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of An Empire* is intellectually and emotionally engaging. Although using actors to dramatize episodes from antiquity, this narrative strategy serves the same ends as, for example, the on-location presenter who conjures stories and participates in lower-key re-enactments. In ancient world documentaries, knowledge and understanding is developed audio-visually, through stimulation of the senses and the mind. In its more limited and extended forms, drama reconstructions activate both. Authority lies in the depiction of recognizable versions of ancient Greece and Rome that resonate with viewers' existing "knowledge," thanks to other cinematic and televisual representations, as well as the positioning of drama episodes within a wider narrative articulated by an absent narrator or on-screen presenter. Replicating artifacts and restoring archaeological ruins in their *mise-en-scène*, drama reconstruction interacts with other elements of ancient world documentary to provide a complementary and coherent vision of the ancient past that illuminates and appears convincing.

LIST OF ANCIENT WORLD DOCUMENTARIES

Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of An Empire (BBC/Discovery Channel/ZDF, 2006)
Armchair Voyage: Hellenic Cruise (BBC, 1958)
Caligula: 1400 Days of Terror (A&E, 2012)
Caligula with Mary Beard (Lion TV, 2013)
Cleopatra: Portrait of A Killer (Lion TV, 2009)
Colosseum: Rome's Arena of Death (BBC/Discovery Channel/RTL, 2003)

In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great (Maya, with BBC and PBS, 1998)
In Search of the Trojan War (BBC, 1985)
The Greeks: A Journey in Space and Time (BBC, 1980)
The Minoans (Lion TV, 2004)
The Spartans (Lion TV, 2003)
The Treasures of Athens and Olympia (First Freedom/Allfilm, 2005)

NOTES

1. Or as Makrinos (2013: 369) puts it, "the actors, performers, presenters, studio or location settings, shots and special effects" comprise the form's "documents."
2. This is not to say that all documentary treatments of ancient Greece and Rome are on television, as a current trend for archaeological film festivals indicates. Such films, however, are few in number and have limited circulation. Television, by contrast, commissions and broadcasts ancient world programs to audiences in the millions. Hence, documentaries on television provide the focus for this chapter.
3. Of additional significance in the late 1940s/50s was the new ability to pre-record and therefore edit footage in advance of its transmission: see Crisell (2002: 95–96).
4. The Hellenic Cruise, organized by W. F. and R. K. Swan Limited, began in 1954. Mortimer Wheeler coordinated academic talks (http://www.castlesoftheseas.nl/swan-hellenic.html), took part as a Guest Lecturer (as noted in the advert for the 1957 cruise in the previous year's *Journal of Hellenic Studies*) and edited the yearly series of cruise handbooks. Note the series was originally broadcast in July–August 1958, during peak holiday season. Web pages accessed November 18, 2016.
5. Note, some of the earliest documentary films already possessed similar ethnographic qualities and facilitated the viewer positioning: most famously Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and Sergei Eisenstein's *Que viva México!* (1932). For a general overview, including discussion of Flaherty's work see Heider (2006); Herschfield (1998) focuses on Eisenstein's film, which was conceived as a history of Mexico.
6. This ubiquity extends to programs beyond historical documentary on television: see Thompson (2010). For travel in the German children's program *Unter wegs mit Odysseus* (1979), see Lindner's chapter in this volume.
7. Keen (2009) and Beard (2009) highlight key problems in the argument and analysis.
8. See Douane (1991) for cinema's "deadly women."
9. Of particular relevance are Kemp's roles as the thuggish Grant Mitchell in *EastEnders* in 1990–1999, 2005–2006 and 2016, as a "have a go" security guard in *Hero of the Hour* (1999) and as an SAS sergeant in *Ultimate Force* (2002); and more recently his "authored" investigations into, for example, gang culture (*Ross Kemp on Gangs*, 2006) and the experience of British soldiers fighting in Afghanistan (*Ross Kemp in Afghanistan*, 2008).

10. http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2003/09_september/12/colosseum_pompeii.pdf. Accessed November 18, 2016.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mythology for the Young at Heart

Martin Lindner

In an age of light and darkness, Zeus, king of the gods, rules the universe. He had a son: young Hercules. Half-god, half-man, young Hercules longs to find his place in the world, the father he's never known and what it means to be a hero. Before the man became legend, before the legend became myth, came the greatest adventure of all.

(Prologue to *Young Hercules*)

Tales of Different Worlds

One of the first things most studies of classical antiquity on screen tend to notice is a division of worlds: Rome is almost exclusively present in the form of historical narratives; Greece, on the other hand, is closely linked to ancient drama and myth. This is a rule with many exceptions; *Fellini Satyricon* or *The 300 Spartans* may come to mind. In addition, the films are less than consistent in their usage of either Greek or Latin names. Hercules—not Herakles—interacts with Zeus and Hera—not with Jupiter and Juno—in most of the productions discussed below (cf. Nisbet 2008: 46–47). Still, as far as rules can be identified for such a complex field, the division between history for Rome versus drama and myth for ancient Greece has been remarkably stable for over a century (Berti and García Morcillo 2008). This disparity would become even more visible if most studies did not just deal

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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with epic films and mainstream TV series. Sunday School films or hardcore pornography on classical antiquity rarely find entry into the popular databases, let alone into academic research (although, see Nisbet 2009). Nevertheless, their numbers are huge, and ignoring them on aesthetic or moral grounds raises doubts about the validity of any comparative treatment. Justifying this omission by recourse to arguments about supposedly lesser "impact" leads further into the methodological minefield, since there is very little data from audience reception studies to support it. This chapter can only provide a general introduction into one of these rather overlooked segments: adaptations of classical mythology for a younger audience. However, as *Percy Jackson* and *Harry Potter* have taught us, "children of all ages" can include a substantial adult audience as well. Unless we want to start with massive empirical research on audience composition, we should keep in mind that what henceforth will be called "children's films" are titles produced for a primarily under-age target group, not necessarily films watched by children. Due to technical restrictions, the discussion will focus on a representative sample including a variety of formats from short to full-length films and TV series.[1]

Almost all of the available material has an either exclusive or predominant connection to the Greek tradition, give or take a couple of Hercules/Herakles amalgamations. The reasons for this emphasis are manifold and open to educated guesswork: some productions present themselves as serious edutainment, which makes time-honored narratives like the epics of Homer attractive as points of reference and sources. Others are clearly derivatives of successful blockbuster films and thereby strengthen an already existing disparity. In addition, many productions are linked to an equally biased non-filmic tradition, with literary adaptations being the most obvious case. Simple financial reasons may be another explanation: producers could assume—and the current wave of film sequels in almost every genre seems to prove them right—that "more of the already popular" guarantees a more reliable outcome. All of this is not to say that individual filmmakers are incapable of basing their decisions on entirely different motives, or on a more complex combination of them. We also should not assume that everybody involved in the production and reception of a film has to share the same motivations and expectations. Without more production and audience reception studies than can be provided here, however, we will have to restrict ourselves to what the films and episodes themselves have to offer.

The popularity of children's films is a rather new phenomenon compared to the history of the medium itself (Staples 1997; Wojcik-Andrews 2000). It will therefore be hardly surprising that the overwhelming majority of the examples discussed below stem from the last third of the twentieth or from

the twenty-first century. In addition, the chosen sample is reduced by thematic focus: Pegasus, the winged horse, undoubtedly belongs to the realm of ancient mythology. If a film narrates the story of Pegasus and the hero Bellerophon, we might discuss its mode of reception—but we would immediately agree that we are dealing with a mythological film. *Barbie and the Magic of Pegasus*, on the other hand, is a fairy tale about Princess Annika/Barbie defending the Cloud Kingdom against an evil wizard. The helpful Pegasus is the princess's cursed and transformed sister, with the classical name used merely as a shorthand for "magic horse with wings." By contrast, *Conan and the Young Warriors* actually has a few points of contact with various mythological traditions. Like *Conan the Barbarian*, the series shows certain parallels to the mode of narration usually employed in mythological films. Its main source, however, is the neo-mythological fiction of American fantasy author Robert E. Howard. There is no general rule for measuring a quota of classical reception necessary for a film to qualify as "mythological." The following sections will instead try to retrace the different modes of reception and adaptation for a number of central narratives.[2]

Once Upon a Time, Zeus had a Son

It is tempting to ascribe the appeal of myths to their similarity to another set of "children's classics": fairy tales. Nobody in his or her right mind would nowadays actually try to equate the *Seven Against Thebes* with the *Seven Swabians*—or Aeschylus with the Brothers Grimm. Yet, the comparison contains more than a grain of truth. The possible varieties can be seen best in the countless adaptations of the life and deeds of Herakles/Hercules. One of the oddest examples is an animated film from 1996 by Golden Films simply called *Hercules*: Alcmene is a pious widow working as a handmaiden in the royal castle. Zeus and the other gods grant her a son that one day shall rise to the throne by marriage. Hera sets out to sabotage the upstart by tricking him into the Twelve Labors, which—as is the case in most of the productions discussed here—bear only some resemblance to the classical tradition. (While the classical tradition itself is far from unequivocal, the "benchmark" for modern films is the list of labors known from Apollodorus's *Bibliotheke*.) In the Golden Films version, they include the Hydra and Cerberus, but also giant spiders, a cyclops and a dragon. In the end, Hercules declines the offer of godhood, marries the princess, and they live happily ever after in their own kingdom. Some aspects can be linked directly to the reception of classical sources, such as the enmity of Hera, the servitude of Hercules or the showdown with the Hydra. Others show remarkable similarities to *Disney's*

Hercules including the depiction of Hera's minions called "Virgil" and "Homer"—corresponding to "Pain" and "Panic" in the *Disney* version. The rest is a mixture of medieval fantasy and fairy tale elements. The story receives a small amount of historization. The date given for the supposedly historical events, however, is a generic "1000 BC" and thus almost synonymous with a fairy tale's "once upon a time."

One of the key elements of all fairy tales is the moral, the lesson to be learned from the preceding narrative. In this regard, *Hercules* from 1996 by Australian Burbank Animation Studios appears to qualify for the category. The film presents Hercules as an aged hero who only became immortal after the death of Deianeira, his wife of many years. He now is confronted with the task of teaching two young gods—Mars and Saturn—the importance of self-discipline, peace of mind and universal harmony. The film is unusual in that it employs a frame narrative to comment on the popular stories about the heroic deeds themselves. Hercules tells how the sudden disappearance of Deianeira and her children made him curse the gods. Hera tricked the council of the Olympians into accepting Eurystheus as an arbitrator, who in turn executed Hera's will and set a series of life-threatening tasks. The following stories use elements from the classical Twelve Labors, such as fighting the Hydra or the Stymphalian Birds, and mixes them with other famous motifs or characters from ancient Greek myths. Hercules saved Ulysses from the Nemean Lion, and just like Ulysses did from Athena, he repeatedly received help from the goddess Nemesis. In his final task, he succeeded by cunning rather than force: Hercules tricked the heads of Cerberus into fighting each other, and finally had his family returned to him. Because love and family are more important than power or status, as Hercules makes clear to his pupils and the audience, our hero declined the offer of immortality for as long as Deianeira was alive.

Hercules—The Classic Tale of a Famous Greek Hero opts for a different approach: explicit references to the mythological tradition combined with elements of Asian anime. The film was produced in Japan in 1995 for GoodTimes Entertainment and focuses on the core narrative of the Twelve Labors. The day before the wedding of Megara and Hercules, jealous Hera slays his mother Alcmene, making the son blame himself for her death. At Delphi, Apollo reveals that the only way out is to go to Eurystheus and complete the Twelve Tasks. *Hercules—The Classic Tale of a Famous Greek Hero* includes all of them. The film not only makes direct references to the mythological tradition, it even implements the hero's famous insignia and hints at the apotheosis. The outward appearance may look more like a Japanese anime series, while the plot is a condensed narrative remarkably strongly based on classical myth. Yet, this is just as much a story about Eurystheus.

He is the character who undergoes change and thus underlines the moral of the tale. In the beginning, Eurystheus is weak and heavily influenced by his minion. In the end, Hercules has earned his honest respect through his deeds and his modesty. Eurystheus chases his evil underling away, enters into a true friendship with Hercules, and transforms into a more worthy and generous ruler.

There is a long line of productions which treat the whole subject with more than just a pinch of irony. The most popular is probably *Disney's Hercules* from 1997 (cf. Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 194–213). Despite its pseudo-classical presentation, the film is a very loose adaptation of classical myth with some alterations typical for Disney movies. Hercules is not the offspring of Zeus's adultery with Alkmene, but instead the beloved son of Hera. The emphasis of the story shifts towards a coming-of-age narrative and the making of a hero. With the help of Philoktetes, the satyr, Hercules has to learn all fame is hollow unless it is accompanied by respect and modesty. Once he has accepted the responsibilities of a true hero, not even Hades and his sinister ploys will stand in his way for long. Hercules can rescue first his beloved Megara from the Underworld and then his parents—as well as the other Olympian gods—from an attack by Hades and the Titans. In addition to this moral message, there are some ironic shots at modern hero-worship or at the omnipresence of marketing and fan merchandise. The thrust, however, is diminished by the fact that *Disney's Hercules* itself was part of an enormous marketing campaign with all kinds of fan merchandise (cf. Solomon 2001: 123–124; Lindner forthcoming 2017).

On a smaller scale, many of these points could be made for the TV series *Young Hercules* as well. The full-length prequel about the young heroes Hercules, Jason and Iolaos in search of the Golden Fleece is slightly more somber in tone. The 50 shorter episodes screened from 1998 to 1999 are closer to *Hercules—The Legendary Journeys*, the series that spurred this spin-off for a younger audience. Many of the stories rely on anachronistic humor and modern parallels. Most of the episodes take place at or near the Academy, a school for adolescent heroes led by the centaur Chiron. Like school-based TV soap operas, young Hercules experiences first love, envy between friends and the aggression of bullies. He engages in sports, receives detention, or helps Iolaos at Parent's Day. Especially in the more serious episodes, we find elements from various classical myths: the Golden Hind, Orpheus and Eurydice, the bow of Artemis, the winged shoes of Hermes, and many more. The leitmotif of the series is derived from the idea that Hercules is basically like a modern single-parent child. The young hero constantly tries to reach out to his father, longs for his approval, blames him for his absence, and misses having a "true" family while also showing respect and gratitude to his

Figure 23.1 Young Hercules wins a band contest at the local bar.

mother. In the last episode, *Valley of the Shadows*, Hercules passes a major challenge set by Zeus in disguise, bringing at least some sort of resolution for the series' main story arc (see Figures 23.1).

Disney's Hercules and *Young Hercules* show how far an adaptation can move away from classical myth while retaining some apparently unchangeable keystones. (Hercules may or may not be the result of adultery, but there is no attempt to portray him as not the son of Zeus.) However, both examples also illustrate the effects of what we might call "intramedial tradition": *Young Hercules* would not have existed without the original series, *Hercules—The Legendary Journeys*, which had already established the kind of narrative world now used by its spin-off. It is also not the only example, although *Hercules and Xena—The Animated Movie: The Battle for Mount Olympus* from 1997 never achieved the same amount of popularity. The success of *Disney's Hercules* led to an animated series with the same name, running for two seasons during the following two years. *Hercules the Invincible Hero—A Legendary Tale* by Italian AVO Films is an unofficial "remake" of the Disney version, with the addition of elements ripped from the sci-fi/fantasy series *Masters of the Universe*. All of these productions make sense only with regard to their reference points within the same medium, rather than as adaptations of classical texts and imagery.

Considering the wide range of results, it would be unfair to summarize the productions discussed above as simplified retellings of classical myth. There

is indeed a certain amount of simplification that stems from the restrictions of the medium: even a full-length feature film cannot hope to cover every detail of the mythological tradition surrounding Hercules—but a similar case could be made for every film on, say, the Persian Wars or the life of Augustus. In this regard, children's films only differ gradually due to a running time of rarely more than 80 minutes. In addition, while this may sound objectionable to a classicist, one can reduce or amalgamate the Twelve Labors and still achieve a very coherent adaptation—as indeed many ancient mythmakers did. Some other reductions are owing to the necessities of marketing the products to an under-age audience (Völcker 2005: 49–76): there is little graphic violence and no sex—both of which are otherwise main attractions for adapting the Hercules myths, be it for action films or for pornographic movies.

On the other hand, we have additions—or at least transformations—to create characters with which children can identify or at least sympathize. Sometimes it is the funny sidekick, sometimes the hero himself is "shrunk." However, even a young Hercules usually is anything but a helpless child. One of the few exceptions is an episode from *Hexe Lilli*, a German animation series from 2003. In *Lilli und Herkules*, the young witch meets a teenage Hercules whom she has to defend from the Minotaur, the evil school bully. (The series apparently considers Hercules to be a historical figure, as the young witch can meet him with the help of a time-travel spell.) On the other end of the scale, we have films like the American *Little Hercules* from 2008: with obvious references to Schwarzenegger's *Hercules in New York* (Winkler 2009a, 108–109), the young hero falls out with Zeus, journeys to modern day America and proves himself by strength of body and heart.

External factors, like the social and economic pressure to make adjustments for an under-age target audience, cannot be denied. It is also clear that, unlike some of the examples discussed below, Hercules films usually have no or rather only a basic educational pretense. They may want to teach timeless values, but not the details and context of Greek myth. Nevertheless, the results do not have to be one-dimensional or overly simplified. Burbank's *Hercules* mentions more gods with name, domain and family ties than most films targeted at an adult audience. *Hercules—The Classic Tale of a Famous Greek Hero* introduces child characters and a frame narrative, yet also a remarkable amount of mythological content for a mere 48 minutes of running time (PAL-version). The son of Zeus is clearly the most popular choice for the "good guy" in myth adaptation for an under-age audience. In terms of didactical content and versatility, Ulysses is more than a tough contender as the following examples will show.

The Long Journey Home

The epics of Homer have been used for educational purposes for literally thousands of years. It seems only fitting, that they should continue this tradition in the modern medium as well. The *Iliad*, however, is a difficult source text to adapt, rich in content that would be worthy of an R rating, but unsuitable if the film is to be marketed to children. The usual solution, therefore, is to focus on different aspects of the Trojan War. The results heavily favor the stories told in retrospect by Ulysses in the *Odyssey* over the *Iliad*'s narrative. Probably the most influential one is the tale about the wooden horse, a motif that also spurred dozens of free or indirect adaptations: the ninth season of *Smurfs*, the 1980s animated TV series from Hanna-Barbera, had an episode called *Trojan Smurfs*. In it, the Smurfs use a hollow wooden rocking horse to return the abducted Smurfette. The episode *Trojan Snorre* from the 2014 animated series *Vic the Viking* has the heroes employ a statue, albeit a human's instead of a horse's, to retrieve their fellow Viking from enemy territory. These kinds of adaptations usually convert the stratagem from a story of conquest into a strictly defensive rescue narrative.

This shift works especially well because the "prototype" has already been established in a similar way. Adaptations closer to the Homeric tradition present Ulysses primarily as an adventurer as some of the following examples will show. He may be a warrior—and a king—as well, but the tales are more about wits than brawn. The Trojan Horse is a clever ruse, an indicator of our hero's intelligence, while its function as an instrument of vicious slaughter pales in comparison or fades into the background entirely. This is not to say that there is no violence in the films and series discussed below—quite the opposite. Still, the reduction of the narrative's context makes it easier to see Ulysses' actions in a more positive light. The effect is strengthened, when the frame narrative is cut: now, we no longer have a series of stories told by potentially unreliable participants. Instead, we get a linear story line with all the consequences of an "absolute narrative." One of the most interesting aspects is which narrative structure the productions adopt and how they deal with the implications of their choice (cf. Paul 2013: 55–66).

Odyssea started out in Czechoslovakia in the mid-1980s as an animated feature film by Krátký Film and Studio Jiří Trnka. Later on, DEFA studios from Eastern Germany took over the material and released the 68-minute version *Die Irrfahrten des Odysseus* in 1986, including a German dubbing and a soundtrack played by the Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra (Petzold 2003: 306–307). The film opens with a cross-fading from a shot of real-life waves to a very schematic style of animation. The first ten minutes are taken

up by a dense summary of the events up to the fall of Troy, given mainly in the form of a narrator's monologue.[3] For the remaining hour, Ulysses steps in as a narrator and central figure, following his adventurous journey home in all detail and in chronological order. A parallel second storyline presents the fate of Telemachus, until father and son reunite on the return to Ithaca. The film ends with the iconic scene of Ulysses and the suitors of Queen Penelope: he reveals himself through his skills with the bow, causing panic among the would-be rulers—albeit only Antinous actually dies. It would probably have been difficult for a communist production to end the story in a happy return to rightful kingship. Curiously enough, the film does not even allow for a proper family reunion. Instead, a last "authenticating" cross-fading takes us to images from Greek vases, then hosted at the Bode-Museum in Berlin. The final shots are combined with another monologue by the omniscient narrator, this time emphasizing the timeless wisdoms of ancient mythology. The result is probably as far as one can get from a fairy tale pattern and its moral. *Die Irrfahrten des Odysseus* admittedly puts a certain emphasis on Telemachus as a young secondary hero, as does the epic, but the character has few aspects to which children could positively relate. The depiction of violent acts may be reduced, but violence still can be justified as a necessary means to an end. The narrative logic has a clear correlation between good or bad acts and good or bad consequences, presented continually in both storylines. Yet beyond that, the film seems to suggest there is more to be gained from the classical myth. The film has an almost didactic approach, apparently wishing to transmit as much of the mythological tradition as possible. The under-age audience may not yet be able to grasp its full meaning, but it is nevertheless important to teach them the story early on: knowledge first, wisdom later. This very teacher-like position—and the somber tone in which it is enacted—makes the following example from the other side of the Iron Curtain all the more colorful by comparison.

Unterwegs mit Odysseus was an early attempt at edutainment in Western German television. The series was aired in 13 half-hour episodes in 1979, the first two of them summarizing the events from Ulysses leaving Ithaca to the fall of Troy. The remaining eleven retrace the hero's journey home in almost complete chronological order. What makes *Unterwegs mit Odysseus* different is the triple narrative structure: the main storyline tells about a family using a sailing boat to follow the "historical" route of Ulysses. To verify the concept, the series offers many quotations from Homer or references to geographical information given in his epics. It also devotes considerable time to showing archaeological remains, even if it has to admit that a link to the mythological tradition is far from certain. The second part of the narrative might be called a modern travelogue. We hear about the challenges of steering a modern

Figure 23.2 Odysseus and the Sirens in *Unterwegs mit Odysseus.*

sailing boat, the technical terms for parts of the vessel, the planning of provisions and supplies or the varying rates of harbor tax. Each time the family enters a modern settlement, we are informed about the local customs or specialties, sometimes with a comparison as to how much the world has changed since the "times of Ulysses," here dated around 2000 BC. The hero himself is the central figure for the third part of the narrative, which takes the form of up to three short animated features per episode. While the rest of the series is narrated by the family's father, the animated parts have their own narrator. The contrast could hardly be starker: the family story and the travelogue are easy-going, told in a colloquial but informative manner, with very few chauvinistic remarks. The animated sections show explicit violence and some nudity (see Figure 23.2), all presented in rhymed monologues full of cruel humor and with the odd misogynist joke.[4] If there is something the young audience should learn from *Unterwegs mit Odysseus*, apart from Mediterranean geography or different types of canvas, it is the importance and ambivalence of Ulysses. The king of Ithaca is a very human character, prone to arrogance, violent behavior and philandering. Almost 40 years after the first broadcast, the narrative technique employed to create that image may appear inconsistent or even inappropriate. Nevertheless, it did work in its own time and, up to a point, it still does so today. The animated sections can be compared to *Tom and Jerry*: the fast-paced cartoon humor allows them to show even the most drastic of story elements. Paradoxically, this

brings the whole series closer to the original myth because there is less need for reduction. The family story and the travelogue manage to convey the importance of the classical tradition for our cultural heritage. Without the animated sections, this would be a harmless and, in the long run, rather dull experience. The third part of the narrative puts the first two in perspective and at the same time presents the *Odyssey* as a tale that is still fresh today.

With a different outcome, the continued relevance of Ulysses is also the underlying idea of *Yullisijeu*. The animated South Korean film from 1998 received various localized European versions based on the Italian one by Mondo TV (89 minutes PAL version). During the first quarter of an hour, *Yullisijeu* summarizes the events that led to the fall of Troy, introducing Ulysses as the war-weary and pious leader. The rest of the film underlines this positive, yet slightly distanced view. In the encounter with Polyphemus, only the Cyclops shows his arrogance by taunting Zeus, while Ulysses invokes the just will of the gods. At the island of Calypso, Athena reveals to him that there is little hope for help from the Olympians: the gods are fighting among themselves, Zeus will stay strictly neutral, and Ulysses is caught in the cross-fire. Only his mortal cunning, so he learns, will be able to save him. The story portrays the hero as struggling against adversity, but without allowing Ulysses much depth of character. Individual gods may sympathize with him or campaign for his demise, but their actual presence comes more in the form of advice, encouragement or omens. *Yullisijeu* replaces the framework narrative with a linear one, including an omniscient narrator. Otherwise, the film mainly follows the Homeric tradition. Some adjustments are made with regard to the under-age audience, especially when it comes to sexual content that is merely hinted at. The violence, on the other hand, is surprisingly direct and bloody for a children's film. *Yullisijeu* uses the elements of the myth for a timeless moral: fate may be cruel at times, and the true test of character is how you play the cards you have been dealt. By this logic, Ulysses is an important hero, but more in the sense of a general example rather than as an individual character. This concept also explains the deviation from a possible happy conclusion: the film spends only a few seconds on the reunion with Penelope, before ("true" to the epic tradition) telling the audience that Ulysses left again a couple of years afterwards. During this voyage into the unknown, the narrator tells us, the hero disappeared—possibly drowned by a deity or forever stranded on the island of a beautiful goddess. *Yullisijeu* ends with a suggestion of apotheosis: Ulysses walking in a halo of light beams similar to the effect used in science fiction to indicate interstellar travel, while the voice-over indicates the ongoing importance and fascination of his story.

The Odyssey, released in 1987 by Australian Burbank Animation Studios, brings us closer again to some depictions of Hercules. In roughly three-quarters

of an hour, the film tells the story of the king of Ithaca, who is just about to return home after the fall of Troy. In a curious inversion of the biblical Deluge, Poseidon threatens to drown unworthy mankind in a great flood, and Athena calls upon her mortal champion Ulysses. He and his men are assaulted by Poseidon's son, the Cyclops Polyphemus. Zeus prevents Poseidon from any direct killings, yet allows him to exert other forms of punishment. Consequently, Ulysses meets Circe, visits the Underworld, encounters the Sirens, and survives Scylla and Charybdis, before landing on the Island of the Sun. Poseidon wrongfully blames him for the slaying of the sacred cattle, but Athena rescues her champion and guides him to the land of the Phaeacians. Ulysses prevents the sacrifice of Princess Penelope to Poseidon, winning a wrestling match against the angry god. The story ends in a double happy ending: Penelope marries Ulysses and follows him to Ithaca. Poseidon grudgingly acknowledges the hero's chivalrous qualities and, it seems to be implied, abstains from any plans to eradicate mankind. Most of the encounters Ulysses has to face in *The Odyssey* are taken from the Homeric tradition. When the film deviates from its main source, it is to create a simple and coherent moral: Ulysses is not just the champion of Athena, he is the champion of all mankind. Through his personal qualities, he can even make Poseidon recognize his error in judgment. If all men were like Ulysses, there would have been no reason for the god's anger in the first place. Preventing the sacrifice of Penelope is a story element borrowed from a different tradition, the myth of Perseus and Andromeda. While this makes it "un-Homeric," it is an important part of a consistent narrative. Ulysses not only accepts his fate and duties in the most formidable way; he also opposes morally wrong acts, regardless of the danger to his own wellbeing.

Millions of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* fans are evidence for how well classical myth, history and science fiction can go together.[5] On a much smaller scale, the same is true for *Uchuu Densetsu Ulysses 31*, an animated French–Japanese TV series from the early 1980s (cf. Castello and Scilabra 2015: 182–183). The Greek gods still rule the universe in the thirty-first century. Ulysses tries to return to Earth in his spaceship, the Odyssey, when his son is abducted. The Followers of Cyclops plan to sacrifice Telemachus, but his father puts an end to their evil schemes. The gods punish Ulysses for his interference and put his crew into a sort of stasis. Only by reaching the Kingdom of Hades can the spell be lifted and will the Odyssey be able to return to Earth. In the 26 episodes, Ulysses faces all types of encounters from the classical tradition: Circe, Calypso, Scylla, Charybdis and the Lotus-eaters, but also Sisyphus, the Sphinx, Atlas and the Minotaur. Several of them are transformed to fit into the futuristic setting, e.g. turning Polyphemus into a giant space robot. Ulysses himself is presented as a "compound hero," incorporating elements of Hercules and

Perseus as well. The gods of *Uchuu Densetsu Ulysses 31* are generally hostile, with a few exceptions: the 24th episode tells a convoluted time travel story, during which the future version of Ulysses meets his ancient Greek counterpart. In the end, the modern Ulysses becomes some sort of *deus ex machina*, saving the day as a stand-in for his wounded "twin." The 26th and last episode shows that even the vengeful gods can be mollified. In a twist similar to the one described for *The Odyssey*, Ulysses has to overcome all personal needs and fears to achieve the greater goal. He declines Hades' offer to sacrifice his crew as the price for a safe journey home. This final proof of character causes the god to lift the spell, and the Odyssey can return to Earth.

One of the main problems for all adaptations is the difficulty of making the world of classical myth accessible without distorting it in the process of intercultural translation (Goltz 2005). Paradoxically, familiarity with science fiction may actually help to relate a story from the even more alien world of ancient myth and culture. On the other hand, Greek and Roman myths are themselves an important source of inspiration for science fiction narratives. The versatility of the classical tradition becomes palpable in the case of Atlantis, especially because—unlike with Hercules or Ulysses—there are no established central characters or "master stories."

The Past is a Foreign Country

The Atlantis narratives, emanating from Plato's famous descriptions, center on the motif of a utopian settlement discovered by outsiders. For children's films, implications of cultural criticism in connection with the myth are less important. In several examples, the famous "demise" has already happened and shows at least some hints at a voluntary retreat from the world. Atlantis usually is defined by its otherness, which is why it can be time-honored as well as futuristic.

This combination of characteristics is the basis for *Atlantis—The Lost Continent*, a short animation film produced by Dingo Pictures in 2001 as a multilanguage European release. A boy called Petros lives in a nameless village in modern-day Greece. While playing on the beach with his dog, Petros finds a bottle containing a map to the lost city of Atlantis. Apart from his grandfather, none of the grown-ups in his village is interested in the fantastic story. A speaking dolphin helps Petros reach the secret cave hiding the entrance to Atlantis. He learns that the city was washed over by the waves of an unidentified flood, and chose to stay underwater to protect its harmonious and advanced society from outward interference. The Atlanteans were able to delegate most of their work to highly intelligent robots. In this peaceful idyll,

Petros is seen as an intruder at first, yet when a girl reveals that she has sent the message in the bottle, the boy is allowed to stay. Before he can to return to his family, he is sworn to secrecy. Home in modern-day Greece, he keeps his word, but dreams of going back to Atlantis again. *The Lost Continent* is not so much a continent as a perfect city, but above all, it is an innocent utopia, in which every child has a friend and a robot playmate.

The advanced civilization of Atlantis is just as much an item of classical reception as it is of science fiction, a fact illustrated also by *Wondrous Myths and Legends* (cf. Lindner forthcoming 2017). The TV series was produced in 1999 by Sony and D'Ocon Films, and planned with a wide story arc for several seasons. The main characters of *Wondrous Myths and Legends* are Nick and Lisa, two teenage siblings who have accidentally discovered the Cavern of Mythos. From there, they can use secret passageways to travel to crucial moments of famous narratives. Most of them belong to the realm of classical antiquity: King Midas and his Golden Touch, Cupid and Psyche or the Trojan War—the last one unsurprisingly centered on the story of the wooden horse. Other adventures bring them into contact with St George, the Norse god Thor, or the Loch Ness Monster. Nick and Lisa realize that the only way out is by visiting the scenarios and making the corresponding myth or legend come to its proper end. Two additional storylines—a time-travelling ancestor and a saboteur—are never fully developed. When the show was cancelled after only 13 episodes, *The Lost City of Atlantis* became the unintentional futuristic ending for the series. The city used its advanced technology to create a giant underwater dome and survive the great flood that drowned the continents. The Atlanteans have evolved into a semi-aquatic race. Although the city is generally peaceful, its society is torn between two factions: the royalists embrace the qualities of the status quo; the "drylanders" pursue a mission to leave the splendid isolation of their secluded home and colonize the world. When Lisa and Nick confirm the surface is habitable, the drylanders force the king to enact a plan that will sacrifice Atlantis and put most of its population at risk to allow their followers to break through. The scheme is thwarted at the last minute, and we learn about a second revolt that took place thousands of years ago, back in the twenty-first century AD. Atlantis preserves its status as secluded utopia of past, present and future times.

Within this general pattern, the individual representations of Atlantis can show a considerable range of variation. In the episode *Lilli in Atlantis* from *Hexe Lilli* (see above), the "time-honored" city is more baroque than antique. *Kong: King of Atlantis*, an American/Philippine animation film from 2004, mixes elements of classical myth, modern fantasy and science fiction. The giant ape used to be king of Atlantis. When his reptilian queen misused her magic and Atlantis's advanced technology, Kong helped to sink

his own kingdom. After his death on earth, humans genetically resurrected him to support them against a return of the powerful queen. The island starts to rise again, and Kong is tricked into reuniting with his reptilian bride. With the help of Atlantean rebels and his friends, he overcomes the queen's influence and sends the island down a second time. The lost city of *Kong: King of Atlantis* is, at its core, still a positive utopia. Once the queen is cut off from mind-control technologies, most of her followers turn out not to be evil at heart. The island may just use its second demise to return to its former glory, as long as the free people of Atlantis stay united in their just revolt.

The list of utopias could easily be extended, e.g. by Disney's *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, with its official and unofficial sequels, or by *Lego Atlantis*, a 2010 TV short. Atlantis lacks a detailed determining tradition, which probably explains its attraction for the very free adaptations of the classical narrative. The same effect seems to be at work in the recently cancelled BBC series *Atlantis*, in the Dutch thriller *Atlantis* from 2008 or in the five seasons of *Stargate Atlantis* from MGM/Sony—all of which fall outside the scope of this chapter because they are clearly not aimed at children. At the same time, most of the productions discussed above are evidence for an important narrative strategy: the "historization" of myth. The archaeological remains or the continued existence of the lost city of Atlantis suggests the idea that there is a "true core" to the classical stories, waiting to be discovered. In the case of the films and series about Atlantis, this discovery can often be done by a journey to a still existent utopia or by some sort of time-travel.

Other examples show a less literal approach to the idea of visiting the realm of myth as part of a journey into the past: *Il était une fois … l'homme* is a French/Japanese animated TV series from the late 1970s, co-produced by several European TV stations. In 26 episodes, it journeys through the history of mankind from its prehistoric beginnings to the present, ending with an ironic vision of life in the twenty-second century. Its sixth episode, *Le Siècle de Périclès*, deals with ancient Greece up to the time of Alexander the Great. The narrative begins with the myth of Zeus and Europa, leading over to Crete and the Minoan civilization. Even though it is introduced with a word of caution, myth has become part of a historical timeline, a phase to be visited on the way toward modern times.

Truth Be Told

In a few rare cases, the narrative strategy of "historization" is subverted to create a less fixed interpretation of classical myth. *The Storyteller* started out as a series on less well-known European folk tales, produced by Jim Henson and

TVS Television in the late 1980s. All episodes had a framework narrative about a friendly old man telling the story to his cheeky speaking dog, played by a puppet similar to the ones from Henson's *The Muppet Show*. In 1990, the mini-series *Jim Henson's The Storyteller: Greek Myths* followed suit. The four short episodes (24 minutes each in the PAL version) deal with Daedalus and Icarus, Theseus and the Minotaur, Perseus and Medusa, and Orpheus and Eurydice. The central tales are close to the mythological tradition and rather unremarkable, apart from the reduction of godly interference. What makes *Greek Myths* different is the framework narrative. Unlike in the original series, the narrator comes across as anything but reliable: he is a crook from ancient Athens, looking for plunder in the Labyrinth. His tales begin with random findings of artifacts, which he then links to famous characters of Greek myth. The artifacts become "authentic" only through his interpretations; it is easy to imagine him telling the same stories to a potential buyer of his stolen goods to raise their price. In turn, the historicity of the tales themselves is cast into doubt, because the factual remains may not be real "historical" evidence. *Greek Myths* goes beyond even that, questioning the myth itself and the idea of lessons to be learned from it. The crook's dog is constantly on the lookout for the simple truths and the moral of the stories. His master, on the other hand, makes a point of how misguiding powerful narratives can be: even a monster such as Medusa ought to be given fair judgement. It is unclear whether the under-age audience grasped these implications, but even this may underline the idea that, in essence, myths are stories and whatever people believe them to be.

Children's films and TV series are not the place to present elaborated scholarly reflections and a rational dissection of classical myths. In addition, there are many different ways to show "the truth behind the story." In the world of *Harry Potter*, a multi-headed dog belongs to a race reproduced by specialist breeders, and it does not require Orpheus to exploit its susceptibility to music. In the alternate reality of *Percy Jackson*, the Greek gods are still very much alive and active, although most humans are, at best, only dimly aware of their influence. All this is neo-mythological fantasy, offering an alternative story instead of a deconstruction of the myth. Most of the adaptations discussed above have their own truths and lessons to be learned: several put an emphasis on moral truths, retelling the classical myths as stories about the worth of honesty, friendship, or humility. Some use myth to illustrate truly timeless rules of human behavior. Others focus on a true historical core or try to teach a myth for its own worth as part of an essential cultural knowledge. A few even use myth to illustrate the true power of narratives. Many of course, embrace the idea that the true function of a story should be to entertain its

audience—or to motivate the parents to buy the DVD for their children. These truths are also not mutually exclusive.

Mythology for the young at heart is quite easy to make, at least from a technical viewpoint, when compared to a blockbuster like *Troy*. The films and episodes are often rather short. A simple style of animation that would look amateurish in a production for an adult audience can be perfectly appropriate for children's television. While they are still not exactly "easy" to make, the lower threshold for entry allows a remarkable variety of adaptations to find their way into the mass market. Up to a point, this may be compared to the era of early silent film—when "one-reelers" were the norm, which made up for their strong technical limitations by an enormous creativity in their choice of subjects (Aziza 2008: 79–86; Michelakis and Wyke 2013). To complicate things further, many of the films and series in question circulate in a very low number of copies, sometimes only marketed in a single language and in the countries in which they were produced. It would also be helpful to have more studies on the influence of—as well as on—written fiction.[6] Mythology for the young at heart presents us with many different challenges, but the first one is the necessity to realize that "for children" is not the same as "childish" (cf. Morris 2000: 1–14).

NOTES

1. Some of the examples discussed below have also been treated in Lindner 2008. I would like to thank Pauline Hanesworth (Edinburgh) and Fiona Hobden (Liverpool) for their valuable critique and comments on the first draft.
2. There are several classical myths with a rich reception in art-house or mainstream cinema and television, which have left little or no trace in productions for an under-age audience (see e.g. James 2011 on Pygmalion).
3. For the authority of voice-over and other "legitimizing" narrative strategies see Lindner 2007: 53–61.
4. Two years later, the team behind *Unterwegs mit Odysseus* produced an animated mini-series called *Abenteuer mit Herakles*. Its six short episodes (15–18 minutes in PAL version) offer a highly condensed version of the myths from the birth of Perseus to the apotheosis of Herakles. Apart from a strange fascination for astronomical constellations, narrative, style and tone are very similar to the animated scenes in *Unterwegs mit Odysseus*.
5. Without claiming completeness: for classical reception in *Star Trek* see the works of Wenskus 2002, Heilmann and Wenskus 2006, Wenskus 2009, and her Chapter 20 in this volume; for *Star Wars* see Winkler 2001, Simons 2007, and Winkler 2009b: 169–177.

6. Some studies on classical reception in children's books graze the topic or develop the necessary theoretical background, see e.g. Kunze 2005, Bertolín Cebrián 2008, Lovatt 2009, and Geerts and Van den Bossche (2014).

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Index

300 (2006) 9, 27, 98, 166, 236–238, 240, 247, 300, 433, 445
300: *Rise of an Empire* (2014) 98, 446
300 Spartans (1962) 113, 158, 433–434, 515

Absurdistan (2008) 212
Abyssinia
  war in (1935–1936) 38
academic authority 12, 41, 112, 494–495
Accatone (1961) 254
adaptation 2, 4, 9, 19, 22, 30, 46, 72, 77, 83, 96, 110, 124, 130, 139, 163–164, 169, 171, 176, 178, 196–197, 210, 220, 258, 268, 281, 285, 389, 392–395, 398, 415, 443, 445, 468–470, 481–483, 486, 516, 520, 530
Adua Italian defeat (1896) 38
Aeneid (Virgil) 1, 253, 255–262, 265–269, 455
Aeschylus 164, 168, 173, 176, 188, 204, 389, 398, 471, 476, 485, 517
Agora (2009) 10, 321–324
Agostino d'Ippona (1972) 10, 313–314
Agrippina (1911) 46
Alberini, Filoteo 39
Alexander (2004) 6, 9, 10, 27, 236–238, 389
Alexander of Macedon 498, 500, 502–503
  fusion of West and East 343–344
  tomb of 342–343
Alexander Romance 331, 333, 343
Alexander Senki (1999) 331 *see also Reign*: *The Conqueror*
Alexander the Great (1956) 101, 104, 106–108, 111–112
Allen (R. C.) and Gomery (D.) categories for analysing films 403
Alma-Tadema, Laurence 80
Amante di Paride (1954) 110
Ambrosio, Arturo (director) 415
Ambrosio Co. 43, 46–47, 49, 80, 415, 417
Amenábar, Alejandro (director) 10, 321
American International Pictures 149
Amphitryon (1935) 217–218

A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen, First Edition.
Edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy.
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An Artist's Dream (1897) 22
Ancient Rome (1909) 22
Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of An Empire (2006) 504, 509–511
ancient world films as a film genre 405–406
Anderson, Paul W. S. (director) 146
Anemogiannis, Giorgos 391
Angelopoulos, Theo (director) 12, 390, 468, 471–472, 475–480
anime 6, 10, 335–336, 338, 340–341, 345, 518
animerama 336–340
Antigone (1961) 179, 391
Antony and Cleopatra (1924) 216
Antony and Cleopatra (1972) 274
Apollodorus 517
Apted, Michael 294
Aramata, Hiroshi 340–344
archaeology 12, 21, 65, 78, 494, 503
archives, film 34, 62
Aristophanes 8, 210–211
Aristotle 24–25, 174, 188, 199, 341–342, 389, 459
  Poetics 24–25, 174
Armchair Voyage: Hellenic Cruise (1958) 496–497, 501–502
Aronis, Dimitri 170
Arsinoe 505–506
art direction 385
art-house cinema 11–12, 20, 32, 111, 156, 163, 166–167, 180, 274, 313, 468, 472, 479
Assunta spina (1915) 42
Astaire, Fred 203–204
Asterix (comics) 462
Asterix et Cléopâtre (1964 comic) 338
Asterix et Cléopâtre (1968) 338
Atlantis 527–529
Atlantis (2008) 529
Atlantis (2013–2015) 529
Atlantis—The Lost Continent (2001) 527–529
Atlantis: the Lost Empire (2001) 529
Atlas (1961) 388
Attila (1954) 134, 148, 388, 440
Attila (2001) 320
Attila 74 (1975) 178
audience
  identification with characters 274–275
Augustus 30, 267, 278, 280, 282–285, 521
authenticity
  in ancient world films 2, 4, 12, 108, 269, 294, 297, 358, 404, 409–410, 415, 420, 470
Avenger (1962) 151
Axt, William 353, 355

Babylon 5 340, 450–452, 454–455, 457–459, 462–463
  Babylonian content 452–455
  definition of Happiness 458–459
  use of Greek philosophy 457
Baker, George 277
Bana, Eric 238, 247
Band Wagon (1953) 203–204
Bara, Theda 67–69, 387
Barbie and the Magic of Pegasus (2005) 517
Barmyan, Buddhas of 261
Barrett, Wilson 308
Barthes, Roland 24–25, 127, 317
Batman 442
Battlestar Galactica (2003–2009) 450, 455–457, 461
  use of Hesiod 456
  use of Xenophon 455–456
Bava, Mario 148, 150–151, 153, 410
BBC
  as public service 272
  classic serials 272
Beard, Mary 494–495
behavior
  lessons in 27
Bekmambetov, Timur 139
Bell, Jamie 239
Bellmunt, Francesca (director) 212

Ben-Hur (1907) 2, 22, 124, 422
Ben-Hur (1925) 7, 10, 71, 73–74, 124, 126–127, 217, 353–354
  chariot race 74
  religion in 73
Ben-Hur (1959) 10, 112–113, 119, 121–123, 125, 138, 148, 215, 220, 351–387, 422
  music for Ben-Hur 364–365
  music for Iras the seductress 357–358
  music lacks exotic elements 356
  theme of redemption 378–379
  "whiteness" in 358–359
Ben-Hur (2016) 13, 139
Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1880 novel) 2, 72, 123–124, 216, 430
  commercial tie-ins 124
  stage versions 2, 124
Benjamin, Walter 3
Bergman, Ingmar (director) 204
Berkoff, Steven 196
Bertolini, Francesco (director) 45–46
Bird, Robert Montgomery 153, 430
Birth of a Nation (1914) 57, 66, 421
blacklist 121
Blasetti, Alessandro (director) 147
Blessed, Brian 174, 278, 284–286
block-booking 92
"blockbuster" 100, 105–106, 119, 352, 516
Bloom, Orlando 247
body
  Greek ideal of 77–79
bodybuilder 2, 151, 155, 256, 366, 438, 441–442 *see also* strongman, muscleman
Bondi, Claudio (director) 318–320
Bonicelli, Vittorio 255
Bonnard, Mario (director) 109, 146
Bouly, Leon 18
Bowles, Peter 276
Boyd, Stephen 366–369
Bragaglia, Carlo Ludovico (director) 109
Brandauer, Klaus Maria 254
Brasini, Armando 65
Brignone, Guido (director) 152
Briulov, Karl (painter) 2
Brooks, Mel (director) 220–221
Brynner, Yul 130–131
Bulwer-Lytton, Edward 2, 43, 430
Burton, Richard 94–95, 104–105, 222, 236
Bushman, Francis X. 366
Butler, Gerard 240, 247, 445
Butoh theatre 194–195
Byrne, Rose 241
Byron, Lord 502

Cabiria (1914) 7, 10, 38, 41, 51–54, 56–57, 61, 147, 387, 404, 415–416, 418–420, 423, 436–437
Cacoyannis, Michael (director) 8, 11, 163–181, 390–391, 393–398, 468, 470
Caduta di Troia (1911) 19, 24, 45, 146, 413, 417, 432
Cajus Julius Caesar (1914) 49
Calhoun, Rory 156
Caligula: 1400 Days of Terror (2012) 494–495, 502
Caligula with Mary Beard (2013) 494–495
Cambridge Latin Course 462
Camera 65 122–123
Camera, movement in pre-war film 48
Camerini, Mario (director) 110, 455
Campbell, Joseph 148, 191, 450
Canale, Gianna Maria 152–153
Cantor, Eddie 219, 222
Caractacus 275–276
Cardinale, Claudia 254, 479
Carlucci, Leopoldo 308
Carnera, Primo 149
Carry on Cleo (1964) 222, 338, 505
Carthage in Flames (1960) 156–158
Carthage, temple of Juno 258, 261
Cartmell, Deborah 481

Cascate di Montegelato 151
Caserini, Mario (director) 48–50, 57
Castellani, Bruto 63, 436
Catherine of Alexandria 324–326
Catholic Church in modern political disputes 318
Catholic Church relations with Italian government 65–66
Centurion (2010) 287
chariot-racing 2, 7, 48–49, 72, 74–75, 101, 123–124, 126, 215, 219–220, 268, 364, 370, 409, 430–431, 450
Chelmsford 123 (1988, 1990) 224
Chi-Raq (2015) 8, 212
Christus (1914) 50
Chung, Peter 341
Cinecittà Studios (Rome) 106, 109, 147, 151, 294, 387, 391, 399, 462
cinema
  in crisis post World War Two 91–92
  vs. television 92–93
cinema chains 92
cinema of attractions 18, 408–409
CinemaScope 94–95, 122, 124
Cinerama 93
Cines (studio) 40, 47, 411, 413
Circe 110, 214, 526
Clash of the Titans (1981) 388, 443
Clash of the Titans (2010) 287
Claudius the God (1935, novel) 9, 271
Cleo to Cleopatra (1928) 217
Cleopatra 43, 68, 295–296, 329, 345, 409, 505–507
Cleopatra (1910) 22
Cleopatra (1912) 415
Cleopatra (1917) 7, 66–71, 217, 387, 421
Cleopatra (1934) 99, 330, 387, 421, 423
Cleopatra (1963) 5, 98, 119, 148, 151, 166, 222, 236, 240, 274, 351, 387, 404, 423, 505
Cleopatra (1970) 10, 336–340
  anti-American themes 339
  genre mixing 336–337
Cleopatra and Her Easy Mark (ca. 1922) 217
Cleopatra: Portrait of a Killer (2009) 12, 504–505
Cleopatra's nose 338
Cleopatra: the Film that Changed Hollywood (2001) 6
Cleopatsy (1918) 82, 217
Clooney, George 221
Cocteau, Jean 194
Coen, Joel and Ethan (directors) 111, 221, 268
Colbert, Claudette 234, 432
Cold War 106, 112, 126, 198, 211, 355, 434, 463
color 31–32
  polychromy *vs.* monochromy 27–28
Colosseum 242, 277, 317, 508–509
Colosseum: Rome's Arena of Death (2003) 504, 507–509
Colossus of Rhodes (1961) 156
Conan and the Young Warriors (1994) 517
Condon, Kerry 244
Conquest of Gaul (1922) 81–83
Constantine the Great 308–309
Constantino il Grande (1962) 309–311, 324
Contempt (aka *Le Mépris*, 1963) 28, 149, 260
conversion
  women as advocates of Christian conversion 309–310, 325–326
Cook (1918) 217
Cooke, Alistair 9, 198–200, 272, 278–280
Cooper, Merian C. (director) 99
Corbucci, Sergio (director) 150–152, 158
Cortigiana di Babilonia (1955) 109
Cottafavi, Vittorio (director) 150–153
Cox, Brian 243
crowd scenes 43–45, 47–50, 52, 57, 63, 74–75, 77, 101, 168, 177, 238–240, 373, 376, 397, 416–417, 420, 474

Crowe, Russell 154, 235
Crowther, Bosley 96, 130, 138, 355, 480
Crusade (1999) 450–452, 459
cultural capital
  of ancient world films 403–404
culture wars 318
Cummings, Erin 239
Cupid and Psyche (1897) 22
Curtis, Tony 128, 134, 241–242
Curtiz, Michael (director) 98

Damon and Pythias (1962) 156
dancing females 441
D'Annunzio, Gabriele 42, 51–54, 65, 438
D'Annunzio, Gabriellino (director) 62
Dante 43, 45
Daredevil (2003) 468, 481–482
Dassin, Jules 204
Daves, Delmer (director) 97
David and Bathsheba (1951) 99
Dawson, Rosario 236
decadence as theme 234–240
De Concini, Ennio 148, 150, 255
Decline of an Empire (2014) 324
De Felice, Lionello 309, 324
Delphic cultural festival 188, 389
Delphic Oracle use in science fiction 457–458
Demetrius and the Gladiators (1954) 97, 106, 113, 147, 153–154, 234, 240, 351
DeMille, Cecil B. (director) 5, 67, 99 109, 221, 234, 317, 351, 387, 404, 420, 422–423
De Reditu (2003) 318–321
Der Irrfahrten des Odysseus (1986) 523, 530
Desert of the Tartars (1976) 255
Destinées (aka *Daughters of Destiny or Love*, *Soldiers and War*, 1954) 210
Die Hermannschlacht (1924) 75, 77
Dio, Cassius 505–507
Diogenes 210, 341–342, 344, 459
Disney studios 12, 148, 214–215, 444–445, 519–520
divismo 41, 57n.4
Doctor Who: *Fires of Pompeii* (2008) 294
documentaries 3, 6, 11–12, 22, 40, 42, 77–79, 178, 192–193, 255, 258, 294, 313–314, 335, 344, 409, 491–511
dolly shots 54, 418, 437
Donati, Danilo 392
Douglas, Kirk 110, 122, 128, 130–131, 133, 137, 148, 266
Douglas, Lloyd C. 94, 96
Dream of Passion (1978) 204
drive-in theatres 93, 149, 439
Dr Who (2005-) 450
Duel of the Titans (1961) 151–152
Duncan, Lindsay 244
Dunne, Philip 96
Dyer, Richard 3
Dying Gaul (statue) 419, 435
Dyl, Yann B. (director) 81

Eagle (2011) 239–240, 276
Eastmancolor 93
Eclogues (Virgil) 267
Edison, Thomas 18
Edwards, J. Gordon (director) 66
Egyptian (1954) 98
Eisenhower, Dwight 95–96
Ekberg, Anita 154
Electra (1962) 11, 163–169, 171–173, 176–178, 391
Electra, *My Love* (1974) 12, 394, 468, 473–475
  revolutionary themes in 473
  use of rituals 474–475
Elektra (2004) 468, 481–483
Emmanuel, Takis 170
Eneide (1971) 253, 255, 258–262
Enter the Titans (1962) 149
epic film 76–77
Epidaurus
  summer festival at 180

eroticism
  in ancient world films 404
Erskine, John 432
escapism 6, 219, 434, 441–442, 444
Escuela De Seductoras (1961) 211
Euripides 164, 167–174, 178–181, 204, 391–394, 397–398, 470–471, 475–476, 485
expressionism 76
exterior scenes
  in pre-war Italian film 44

Fabiola (1854, novel) 308, 315
Fabiola (1918) 50, 63, 308
Fabiola (1949) 147, 308
Fall of the Roman Empire (1964) 3, 5, 119, 154, 166, 235, 240, 256, 274, 310, 317, 460
Farrell, Colin 236
Fascism 65
Fast, Howard 129, 135–136, 430
Fawlty Towers (1975, 1979) 463
Fehmiu, Bekim 254
Fellini, Frederico (director) 254, 317
Fellini Satyricon (1969) 262–265, 515
Fertis, Giannis 169
Feuillade, Louis 30, 432
Fiddlers Three (1944) 222–223
film
  length of 41
film archives 14
film d'art 413–414
film formats 122
film narrative 23
film rights 72
film scores
  budgetary constraints in postwar Hollywood fillms 352
  as signifier of emotion 353
filone (=stream, trend) 151
Flickorna (aka *The Girls*, 1968) 211
Fontana, Dorothy 451
Fool There Was (1915) 67
Ford Foundation 198–201
Forest, Mark 149, 151
Forrest, Fredric 254
Forsyte Saga (1967) 273
Fotopoulos, Dionysis 393, 395–397
Fotopoulos, Vassilis 390, 393
Francisci, Pietro (director) 11, 148, 152, 156, 440
Franklin, Carl 287
Frazer, James 259, 261
Freda, Riccardo (director) 109, 152, 311
Fregoli, Leopaldo 40
Friends, Romans and Leo (1917) 82, 216
Frine, Cortigiana d'Oriente (1953) 109
Fry, Christopher 125
Fuller, Loie 28–29
Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (1966) 219–221, 223, 226, 341
Fury of Achilles (1962) 256, 260

Galla Placidia 310
Gallone, Carmine (director) 56, 109, 147, 156, 438
Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011–2018) 9, 255, 464
Gaumont Studios 28, 30, 47, 80
Gemma, Giuliano 149
Gérôme, Jean-Léon 69, 431
Gerrold, David 451
Gerusalemme liberata (1911) 46
giallo 151
Giant of Marathon (1959) 151
Gibbon, Edward 275, 310, 316
Gibson, Mel (director) 318
Giuliano l'Apostata (1919) 309
Gladiator (1831 play) 154, 430
Gladiator (2000) 3, 9–10, 27, 154–155, 166, 233, 235, 240, 249, 293, 300, 317, 320, 398, 404, 460, 509
Gladiators 7 (1962) 154
Godard, Jean-Luc (director) 28

Godzilla, King of the Monsters (1956) 145, 439
Goliath and the Dragon (1960) 149
Graham, Martha (director) 8, 189, 191, 195
Graves, Robert (novelist) 9, 273
Great Train Robbery (1903) 410
Greco-Roman dress 386
Greece
  problems of accessibility to audience 4
  as source of escapism 434
Greek (1988) 189, 196–197
Greek Mirthology (1954) 214
Greeks: A Journey in Space and Time (1980) 500
Grierson, John 491–492, 503
Griffith, David Wark (director) 55–56, 66, 221, 387, 412, 414, 417, 419–420
Guazzoni, Enrico (director) 46–50, 52, 57, 100, 415, 417, 418
Guthrie, Tyrone (director) 8, 188–191, 195, 198–199, 202, 389
  use of masks 190–191, 389
Guy-Blaché, Alice 409

Haggard, Rider 68
Hail , Caesar! (2016) 5, 111, 221, 268
Hamilton, Edith 165
Hammid, Alexander (director) 189, 193
Hannah, John 239, 246
Harareet, Haya 358–359
Hargitay, Mickey 151
Harris, Richard 235
Harrison, Richard 154
Harryhausen, Ray 158, 388, 404, 443
Harry Potter 516, 530
Hatot, George (director) 4, 25
Hawkins, Erick 191–192
Hayward, Susan 153
Headey, Lena 241, 247
Helen of Troy (1956) 101–103, 106, 109–110, 112, 256, 387
Helen of Troy (aka *Helena*, 1924) 7, 75–77, 432
Heliogabalus 30
Heller, Bruno 294
Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1986) 507
Hepburn, Katherine 169
Hercules (1958) 11, 111, 145, 151, 214, 256, 388, 422, 439–441, 443–444, 446
Hercules (1966) 517
Hercules (1996) 518, 522
Hercules (1997) 12, 148, 215–216, 441, 444–445, 517–519
Hercules (1998) 445
Hercules (2014) 441, 446
Hercules Against the Moon Men (1964) 441
Hercules and Xena—The Animated Movie: The Battle for Mount Olympus (1997) 520
Hercules at the Centre of the World (1961) 149, 153
Hercules in New York (1969) 522
Hercules in the Vale of Woe (1961) 214
Hercules Off to Conquer Atlantis (1961) 149, 153, 441
Hercules Returns (1994) 158
Hercules—The Classic Tale of a Famous Greek Hero (1995) 518, 522
Hercules the Invincible Hero—A Legendary Tale (1997) 520
Hercules: The Legendary Journeys (1995–1999) 6, 299, 446, 519–520
Hercules Unchained (1959) 149, 256. 388, 441
Herder, Johann Gottfried 307
Herzog, Werner (director) 163, 204
Heston, Charlton 126, 128, 351, 353, 363–365, 368, 378
Hexe Lilli (2003) 521
high culture 217, 330, 415, 429
Hinds, Ciaran 244

Hines, Gregory 221
hippodramas 2, 74, 430
History of the World, Part I (1981) 220
Hitler, Adolf 137, 199, 218, 335
Hollywood film production 406–407
Hollywood idiom 164, 171, 180
Hollywood on the Tiber 149
Hollywood Ten 120–121
Homer 46, 75, 77, 101, 106, 110, 112, 255–262, 265–267, 269, 386, 398, 415, 431–432, 461, 501, 516, 518, 522, 524–526
Horace 65, 150
Howerd, Frankie 223
HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) 119–121, 127
Hughes, Bettany 501, 503
Hurt, John 282
Hypatia 321–325
Hypatia (novel, 1853) 323

I, Claudius (novel, 1934) 9, 271
I, Claudius (1976) 9, 271–288, 293, 463–464, 510
  "everyone's an actor" 280
  messenger speeches 281–282
  opening credits 279
  use of interior shots 276–277
Il était une fois … l'homme (1978) 529
Iliad (Homer) 1, 75, 101, 106, 109, 215, 258, 431, 456, 522
Immortals (2011) 444
Imperium: Augustus (2003) 283
indoor filming 46, 190–191 196, 276, 330, 416
indoor shooting, 276, 330, 416
Inferno (1911) 45–46, 414–415, 417
In hoc signo vinces! (1913) 50, 308
In Search of the Trojan War (1985) 500
Integralism 322
intertextuality 470, 485–486
In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great (1998) 497–500, 502
Intolerance (1916) 55, 67, 269, 275, 420
Invincible Gladiator (1961) 154
Iphigenia (1977) 163–168, 170–172, 174–175, 177, 274, 391, 395
Iphigenia in Aulis (1990) 203
Island of Calypso: Ulysses and the Giant Polyphemus (1905) 22, 432
Italian films
  export of 41
Italy
  creation of identity 39
  inequality in 37–38
  unification of 37

Jacobi, Derek 285–286
Jannings, Emil 63–64
Janscó, Miklós (director) 12, 394, 468, 471–474, 479, 481
Japan
  reception of European classics 335–336
Jarman, Derek (director) 10, 314
Jason and the Argonauts (1964) 158, 388, 443
Jennings, Gordon 410
Jim Henson's The Storyteller: Greek Myths (1990) 530
Joan the Woman (1917) 67
Johnson, Dwayne ("the Rock") 11, 446
Judith of Bethulia (1914) 57, 66, 420
Julius Caesar 43, 146, 297, 338, 387, 510
Julius Caesar (1908) 19, 22, 45
Julius Caesar (1953) 106, 387
Julius Caesar (1970) 274
Jupiter's Darling (1955) 219
Jupiter's Thunderbolts (1903) 20–21, 216
Juvenal 262–265

Kapoor, Prithviraj 330, 335
Karlatos, Olga 254
katabasis 267
Katselli, Aleka 168
Kazakos, Kostas 170

Keaton, Buster 216
Keita, Rahmatou 329
Kemp, Ross 508–509
Kerr, Deborah 104, 234
King Arthur (2004) 320
Kingdom of Heaven (2005) 322
King, Henry (director) 99
King of Kings (1927) 338, 421
Kleine, George 412
Knossos 501
Koestler, Arthur (novelist) 130, 132
Konchalovsky, Andrei 255
Kondouros, Nikos 391
Kong: King of Atlantis (2004) 528
König Ödipus (1967) 393
Korda, Alexander (director) 102, 213, 432
Koster, Henry (director) 94
Kroll, Nathan 192
Kubrick, Stanley (director) 113, 123. 131–132, 135, 234

Labaki, Nadine 212
Ladd, Alan 152
Lamarr, Hedy 110
Lampada della nonna (1913) 47
Lang, Fritz (director) 52, 149
Last Day of Pompeii (1830–1833 painting) 2
Last Days of Pompeii (1834 novel) 2, 43, 146, 263–264, 430
Last Days of Pompeii (1900) 410
Last Days of Pompeii (1935) 99, 154
Last Days of Pompeii (1950) 147
Last Days of Pompeii (1959) 146, 151
see also Ultimi giorni di Pompeii
Last Legion (2007) 320–321
Late Antiquity
as paradigm of crisis 307–308, 312–314
Laughton, Charles 133, 135, 234, 236
Lawless, Lucy 246
Le Baccanti (1961) 388
Lee, Belinda 153
Lee, Christopher 149
Lee, Spike (director) 8, 212
Legend of Aeneas (1962) 256, 260
Legend of Hercules (2014) 441
Légende d'Oedipe (1913) 197
Legions of Cleopatra 153
Lego Atlantis (2010) 529
Leone, Sergio (director) 146, 150, 156, 158
LeRoy, Mervyn (director) 99
Lessing, Gotthold 26
Lester, Richard (director) 220, 223
Levine, Joseph E. 145, 439, 444
Life of Brian (1979) 224, 274, 312, 462
Lisistrata (2002) 212
Little Hercules (2008) 522
Livia Augusta 9, 278, 280, 282–284, 286–288, 464
location shooting 22, 75, 80, 101, 151, 176, 188, 255, 274, 277, 294, 299, 409, 411–412, 416–417, 437, 492, 496–498, 500, 502–503, 505, 511
Long Distance Wireless Photography (1908) 19–20
Lorenzo Lledo, Alejandro (director) 399
Lotta dell'uomo per la sua sopravivivenza (1970) 313–314
Luke the Gladiator (1916) 216
Lumière brothers (directors) 2, 18, 22, 39, 40, 409
Lysistrata 8, 22, 210–213, 226
Lysistrata (1910) 22
Lysistrata (1972) 212

Maccabei (1911) 50
Macdonald, Kevin (director) 239, 276
MacDonald, William J. 294
Maciste 52–55, 58n.9, 146–152, 158, 214, 419, 436–438, 441
Maciste (1915) 147
Maciste against the Vampires (1961) 150
Maciste alpino (1916) 152
Maciste imperatore (1924) 152
Maciste in Hell (1926) 152

Maciste in Hell (1962) 152
Magee, Patrick 174
Maggi, Luigi (director) 43, 46–47
male subjectivity in postwar Hollywood films 352
Maltz, Albert 96
Manfredi, Valerio Massimo 253
Mangano, Silvana 110
Maniura, Peter (director) 195–196
Mankiewicz, Joseph L. (director) 98, 106, 423
Mann, Anthony (director) 3
Marcantonio e Cleopatra (1913) 49, 413
March, Fredric 234
mare nostrum (Mediterranean as Italian sea) 38, 56, 266
Marey, Etienne-Jules 18
Marriage of Cupid and Psyche (1913) 30
Martindale, Charles 479, 481, 485
Martoglio, Nino (director) 42
Marx, Karl 21
masculinity on screen 72
Masterpiece Theatre 271–273, 278
Maté, Rudolph (director) 113
McCarthyism 134, 220
McIntyre, Liam 303
McNiece, Ian 505
Medea (1969) 255, 259, 392
*Medea (*1988) 172
Medusa 443, 530
Meet the Spartans (2008) 445
Melfi, John 287
Méliès, George (director) 3–4, 19–22, 26, 216, 386–387, 409, 431
Mendoza, David 353, 355
merchandising 100, 444–445, 519
Mercouri, Melina 179
Messalina (1922) 63
Messalina (1951) 109
Messalina (1960) 150–151, 153
MGM (studio) 71–72, 74, 92, 99–100, 106, 122–125, 127, 134–135, 181, 358
Michele alla guerra (1994) 254
Mighty Aphrodite (1995) 389
Mighty Hercules (1963–1965) 445
Milius, John 294
Miners' Strike (1972, 1974) 276
Minnelli, Vincente 204
Minoans (2004) 501
Minotaur 22, 521, 526, 530
mise-en-scène 52, 67, 196, 338, 376, 419, 431, 434, 505, 511
Mitchell, Gordon 256
Modern Sappho (1905) 22
Modi, Sohrab (director) 330
Mogherini, Flavio 387–389
Moloch, temple of 52–53
Moorcock, Michael 454–455
Moore, Roger 152
Mopsus 262–265
moral deviance 240–247
Morris, Kirk 151
Morte d un amico (1959) 254
Mostel, Zero 220
Motion Picture Patents Corporation 43, 408, 412, 414
Mounet-Sully, Jean 197
Mud Men of New Guinea 258
Mulvey, Laura 24
Murro, Noam (director) 98
muscleman 146, 148, 150, 155–156, 214, 338, 341, 436–438 *see also* strongman
Museo della civiltà romana 257
music 26
music film accompaniment 10
Mussolini, Benito 65, 109, 147, 149, 199, 218, 257, 266, 268, 335, 438
Mycenae 168, 176, 180, 202, 389, 391, 395
My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done? (2009) 204

Nabdaile Cleopatrei (1925) 217
Napierkowska, Stacia 30
Nascimbene, Mario 255

Nehru, Jawaharlal 330
neo-mythology 399
Neptune's Daughters (1900) 22
Nero 11, 25–26, 43, 46, 63, 146, 222, 235, 240, 269, 335, 409, 431, 461, 510–511
Nero (1909) 19, 22, 46
Nero (1925) 216
Nerone (1930) 218
Nero Testing Poison on Slaves (1897) 25
Niblo, Fred (director) 71
nickelodeon theatres 407, 412, 416
Nielsen, Connie 235
Night Journey 189, 191–194
Noah (2014) 139, 296
Noah's Ark (1929) 423
Noa, Manfred (director) 7, 75
Noh theatre 195
non-violence 316, 354
Notari, Elvira 412
Novarro, Ramon 7, 71–72, 364–367, 378
Nozze d'oro (1911) 47
Nymph in the Waves (1900) 22

objectification
  of females 26
Odissea (1968) 253–255
Odissea nuda (1961) 254
Odyssey (1911) 19, 46, 146, 415
Odyssey (1987) 525
Odyssey (1997) 255
Odyssey (Homer) 1, 110, 158, 253, 260, 265–266, 431, 455–456, 459, 467, 522, 525–527
Oedipus Rex (1908) 413
Oedipus Rex (1957) 389
Oedipus Rex (play) 164, 188–191, 193–195, 197, 199–204
Oedipus the King (1968) 201, 393
O.K. Nerone (1951) 219
Oliver, Neil 505–506
Olivier, Laurence 133, 241
Omegna, Roberto (director) 43
Omnibus (1952–1961) 198–201
omniscient narrator 168–169, 493, 495, 523
Orestis (1969) 390, 393–394
Orpheus 22, 519, 530
O'Toole, Peter 244, 285
Oxilia, Nino 308

Pacchioni, Italo 40
Padovan, Adolfo (director) 45–46
Pagano, Bartolomeo 11, 58n.9, 146, 436–437
Palin, Michael 224, 500
Palmara, Mimmo 154–155
Palmer-Sikelianos, Eva 188, 389
"pan and scan" 6
panning shots 344, 418, 424, 437
Papamoschou, Tatiana 171
Papas, Irene 169, 171–172, 175, 254, 263
Paramount Decree (1948) 92–93, 111
Paramount Studios 109–110, 125, 421
Park, Reg 149, 151–153
Parthenon 392, 501
Pasolini, Pier Paolo (director) 8, 163, 254–255, 259, 317, 392
Passion of the Christ (2004) 318, 324, 398
Passion Play films 412
Pastrone, Giovanni (director) 7, 41, 51–52, 436–437
  shot choices 55
  trick shots 55
  use of dolly 54
Pathé Studios 28–30, 407–408, 412
Peplum 8, 42, 111, 113, 145–158, 214–215, 255–256, 308, 338, 340, 388, 437–442, 446
  gladiator sub-genre in 153–155
Percy Jackson 516, 530
Perkins, Anthony 392
Perret, Léonce (director) 79
Perses (1961) 389
Perseus 388, 399, 443, 526–527, 530

Persona (1966) 204
Pertwee, Sean 510
Petersen, Wolfgang (director) 103
Petrolini, Ettore 218
Phaedra (1962) 392
Phillips, Sian 278, 285–286
Phoenix, Joaquin 235, 243
Pitt, Brad 238, 247
Pizzetti, Ildebrando (composer) 10, 51
Plato 26, 342, 459–461, 527
Platohedron as Philosopher's Stone 342
Plautus 150, 210, 217, 220
Plebs (2013) 224–225
Plummer, Christopher 154, 199–200
Podestà, Rossana 104, 110
Pompeii 2, 294, 431, 462–463
Pompeii (2014) 146, 154
Pompeii: the Last Day (2003) 462
Poots, Imogen 241
popular culture 18, 22–23, 32, 181, 204, 251, 301, 336, 410, 412, 429–430, 432–434, 437, 439, 444, 446, 467, 469, 481–482, 495
Porter, Edwin S. 410
Porus as Indian national hero 333
Prager, Wilhelm (director) 77
Presa di Roma (1905) 37, 40, 42
Pride and Prejudice (1995) 273
Prikis, Max 244
Private Life of Helen of Troy (1925 novel) 101, 213, 432
Private Life of Helen of Troy (1927) 101, 213
Production Code 111, 213, 472, 483
Prometheus Bound (1927) 389
Prometheus in the Second Person (1975) 390
pueri delicati 263
Pulman, Jack 281, 286
Pygmalion and Galatea (1898) 26
pyrodramas 2
Pythagoras 342
Quinn, Anthony 110, 148
Quo Vadis? (1913) 47–48, 57, 61, 66, 100, 216, 414–415, 417–420, 436
Quo Vadis? (1924) 62–64
Quo Vadis (1950) 5, 99–100, 106, 108–109, 112–113, 123–125, 148, 214, 219, 221, 240, 297, 308, 338, 351, 387
Quo Vadis? (1985) 253–256, 258–262, 264–266, 268–9
  theme of children 262–265

Rakhi, feast of 331–332
reception 2, 4–5, 12–13, 22, 32, 62, 163, 171, 173, 179–181, 210, 226, 269, 271, 293, 299–301, 307–309, 313, 317, 323, 330, 333, 336, 344–345, 450, 456, 460, 463, 467–473, 479, 481, 483, 485–486, 516–517, 528
Redgrave, Vanessa 165, 167
Redwood, Michael (director) 324
Reeves, Steve 11, 145, 151–152, 256, 419, 422, 437
Reign: the Conqueror (1999) 10, 340–344
  stylization of characters 331, 341–342
Reith, John 272
Return of Ringo (1965) 158, 258
Return of Ulysses (1908) 19, 22
Revenge (2011–2015) 12, 469, 481, 484–485
Revenge of Hercules (1960) 149, 153
revenge tales 471–472
Revolt of the Gladiators (1959) 152–154
Revolt of the Praetorians (1964) 154
Riefenstahl, Leni (director) 218
Roamin' Gladiator (1927) 217
Roaming Romeo (1928) 217
Robbie, Seymour (director) 200
Robe (1953) 7, 94–98, 106, 112–113, 122, 147, 221, 234, 351, 422

Roddenberry, Gene 451
Rogers, Randolph 146
Roman empire, British attitude towards 275–276, 279–280
romanitas 308
Roman Orgy (1911) 30
Romans and Rascals (1918) 82, 216
Roman Scandals (1933) 219, 221, 422
Rome (BBC-HBO, 2005–2007) 9, 158, 238, 240, 244, 247–249, 262–265, 287, 293–300, 304, 505, 510
  audience numbers 294
  cost 297
  elite and lower class worlds 297–298
  original outline 295–296
Rome, Open City (1945) 268, 440
Romulus and the Sabines (1961) 152
Rosselini, Roberto (director) 10, 268, 313–314, 318–319
Rossen, Robert (director) 101, 104, 111
Rossi, Franco 9, 158, 253–269
Rózsa, Miklos (composer) 10, 125, 351, 353, 356, 360, 362–363, 367–374, 376, 379
  heroic
    male music for Ben-Hur 363–364
  music for Christ 371–376
  theme for Esther 360–362
  theme for intermasculine friendship 367–370
  themes for crucifixion scene 376–378
  use of exoticism 362–363
runaway productions 106–109, 439

Sadoul, Georges 38, 50, 52
Saffo e Priapo (1921–1922) 79
Salambo (1914) 416
Samson and Delilah (1949) 99, 122
Sandokan 152
Sandow, Eugen 2, 419, 435–436
Sandra (1965) 12, 468, 479–481
San Francesco il poverello d'Assisi (1911) 50
San Paolo (1910) 50
Santoro, Rodrigo 236, 242–243
Sappho, Venus of Lesbos (1960) 156
Sarah Connor Chronicles (2008–2009) 450, 457
Sardou, Victorien 68, 308
Satyricon (dir. Polidoro, 1969) 388
Saudek, Robert 198–201
Saylor, Steven 253
scenography
  use of ancient sites 388–389
Schoedsack, Ernest B. (director) 99
Schünzel, Rheinhold (director) 217
science fiction 11
Scipio Africanus (1937) 5, 56, 147, 156, 438
Scipio detto anche l'africano (1971) 389
Scott, Gordon 151
Scott, Ridley (director) 3, 27, 233, 322
Sebastian
  as gay icon 315–316
Sebastiane (1976) 274, 314–317
Second Greatest Sex (1955) 211
Serena, Gustavo 42
Serpentine Dance (1905) 28
set design 385
Sevilla Film Studios (Madrid) 106
sexuality 9, 10, 41–42, 68, 71–72, 79, 128, 149, 174, 192, 196, 211–213, 221, 225, 233–235, 237, 240–249, 268, 273, 280–282, 285, 293, 297–298, 300–301, 304, 312, 314, 316, 318, 337–339, 356, 358, 360, 369, 404, 433, 438, 442, 462, 494, 501, 510, 521, 525
Sheen, Martin 504, 510–511
Sherwood, Robert 422, 424
Siege of Syracuse (1960) 156
Sienkiewicz, Henryk 43, 47–48, 62, 99, 146, 430
Sign of the Cross (1895 play) 308

Sign of the Cross (1932) 5, 99, 134, 234, 240–241, 421
Sikandar (1941) 10, 330–335
  nationalist agenda in 334–335
Sikandar-e--Azam (1965) 335
Sirens 455, 521, 526
Sirk, Douglas (director) 320
Skouras, Spyros P. 95
Slave of Phydias (1917) 79–81
Slave's Love (1907) 19
Smog (1962) 254
Smurfs (1981–1990) 522
Snyder, Zack (director) 27, 98, 433
Son of Spartacus (1962) 152
Sophocles 164, 179, 188–189, 191–194, 197–199, 201–204, 389, 391–393, 398–399, 458, 471, 476, 485
Sopranos (1999–2007) 287
Sorbo, Kevin 446
sound and Silent Film 83–84
Source (2011) 212
Spartaco (1913) 152, 415, 419, 436
Spartaco (1952) 109, 147, 154, 311
Spartacus (1951 novel) 129–130, 430
Spartacus (1960) 7–8, 113, 119–122, 127–138 152, 154, 166, 234, 240, 256, 297, 300–301, 304, 351, 387, 509
  Large *vs.* Small Spartacus 132, 136–8
Spartacus (2004) 505
Spartacus (STARZ, 2010–2013) 9, 139, 238, 240, 245, 247–249, 287, 293, 299–304, 509
  elite and lower class worlds 301
  vicarious sex and violence 304
  violence and sex 300–301
Spartakusbund 129
Spartans (2003) 503–504
spectator responses to film 25
Sperduti nel buio (1914) 42
Sposa del Nilo (1911) 417
stage shooting *see* indoor shooting
stage *vs.* film 180, 187–188
Stamp, Jonathan 294
Stargate Atlantis (2004–2009) 529
star system 67, 70–71
  British imports 104
  contracts 103
  European actors 104
Star Trek 449, 451, 526
  Babylonian content 454–455
Star Trek (original series 1966–1969) 450–452, 454–457, 459–464
Star Trek: *Deep Space Nine* (1993–1999) 450
Star Trek: *Enterprise* (2001–2005) 450
Star Trek: *The Next Generation* (1987–1994) 450
Star Trek: *Voyager* (1995–2001) 450
Star Wars 526
Star Wars (1977) 256
Steel, Alan 151
Stella (1955) 179
Stevenson, Ray 238
Stoics 235, 460–461
Stone, Oliver (director) 27, 236
Storaro, Vittorio 255, 260
Straczynski, Joseph Michael 451–454, 459
Stratford, Ontario Festival 189–190
Stravinsky, Igor 189, 193–196
Strella/A Woman's Way (2009) 398
Strode, Woody 154
strongman 53, 55, 58n.6, 63, 148, 214, 419, 435
studio system 7, 61, 67, 71, 120, 121, 131, 166, 179, 380n.3
Suetonius 150
sword and sandal films 27, 109, 150, 166, 176, 214–215, 219–221, 404
Sydow, Max von 254

Tacitus 269, 275
Tatum, Channing 239
Tavernier, Bertrand (director) 151
Taylor, Don (director) 201–203

Taylor, Elizabeth 222, 505
Taymor, Julie (director) 189, 193–195
Tazavellas, George 179
Technicolor 27, 73, 93, 151, 422
Technirama 122, 123
Telemachus 254, 265–266, 523, 526
television
  as a medium 3, 6–9, 12, 25, 57, 92–93, 97–98, 100, 103, 109–110, 122, 139, 150, 155, 158, 164, 187–188, 196, 198–203, 211, 226, 245, 254–255, 271–272, 274, 277–278, 282, 285, 293–294, 296–297, 300, 303–304, 345, 398, 444–446, 485, 492–493, 495–498, 501, 503, 509, 524, 531
Ten Commandments (1923) 421
Ten Commandments (1956) 109, 351, 422
Ten Gladiators (1963) 155
Teodora (1921) 308
Teodora, Imperatrice di Bisanzio (1953) 310–312
Terence 210
Tessari, Duccio (director) 148–150, 158, 258
Tezuka, Osamu 336, 338
theatres
  numbers in Italy pre-war 40
Theban Plays 201–203
Theodorakis, Mikis 165, 168
Thermae Romae (2012, 2014) 294
Theseus 213, 399, 444, 530
Three Ages (1923) 216
Three Stooges Meet Hercules (1961) 214–215
Todd-AO 122
Tom and Jerry 524
Torchwood Season One (2006–2007) 450
tracking shots 74, 195, 397, 418
Travelling Players (1975) 12, 390, 468, 475–478
Treasures of Athens and Olympia (2005) 502
trick films 18, 21, 25–26, 31, 45–46, 55, 78, 81, 146, 153, 255, 407, 409–411, 422, 432
Trier, Lars von 163, 172
Trinder, Tommy 222
Trip to Greece (1908) 22
Triumph der Liebe (1947) 210
Triumph of the Ten Gladiators (1964) 155
Trojan Horse (1961) 151, 256
Trojan Women (1971) 163–169, 173, 177, 274, 394
Trollope, Antony (novelist) 273
Troy (2004) 6, 103, 151, 158, 238, 240, 256, 531
Trumbo, Dalton 120–121, 129–130, 132–137
Tsagas, Christos 170
Turnage, Mark-Anthony 189, 196–197
Twentieth Century-Fox Studios 94–95, 97
*Two Gladiators (*1964) 154–155
Tzavellas, George 390–391

Uchuu Densetsu Ulysses 31 (1981–1982) 526–527
Ulisse (1954) 110–111, 148, 255, 266, 329, 388, 455
Ultimi giorni di Pompeii (1908) 43, 408–410, 415, 419
Ultimi giorni di Pompeii (1913) 49, 57, 146. 216, 417
Una rosa per tutti (1967) 254
Un bambino di nome Gesù (1987) 254
Under the Standard of Rome (1959) 154
unreliable narrator 523, 530
Unterwegs mit Odysseus (1979) 524
Up Pompeii! (1969–1970 tv, 1971 film) 223–224, 226
Upstairs, Downstairs (1971–1975) 273
Ursus the Rebel Gladiator (1962) 155
Ustinov, Peter 133–135, 155, 214, 234, 236, 241

Vachlioti, Denny 392
Vadis, Dan 155
vamp, the 67–70
variety theatre 40
Vassiliou, Spyros 391
Vatican II 263
vaudeville 3, 20, 29, 197, 217, 219–220, 407
Vendetta dei barbari (1960) 310
Vent'anni neri (Fascist era) 259
Venturini, Giorgio (director) 256
Verley, Renaud 265
Vic the Viking (2014) 522
Vidal, Gore 111, 125–126
Vidali, Giovanni Enrico (director) 49, 146, 152, 415, 417, 436
violence 25–26, 164, 173, 177–179, 186, 212, 234, 238–239, 247, 258–259, 266, 268, 282–285, 293, 298, 300, 304, 313–314, 394, 439, 445, 476–477, 521, 523–525
  on screen 25
  off screen 30
  offstage in Greek drama 173, 476
Virgil 1, 11, 256, 258–260, 266, 269, 455, 518
Visconti, Luchino (director) 12, 254, 468, 472, 479–481
Vitagraph company 414, 417–418
voiceover narration 170, 259, 261, 473, 492–494, 497–498, 501, 503, 505–508, 510–511

Walker, Polly 244, 287
Wallace, Lew 2, 130, 430
Warner Bros. Studios 95, 101, 103, 109–110, 125
Warrior's Husband (1933) 213–214
Way of the Cross (1909) 308
Ways to Strength and Beauty (1925) 77
Weinberg, Herman 424
Wheeler, Sir Mortimer 496–497, 502
Where Do We Go Now? 212
White Warrior (1959) 152
Whitfield, Andy 239, 302
Windfall in Athens (1954) 179
Wise, Herbert (director) 101, 104, 277–278, 284–286, 288, 293
Woman in the Painting (1955) 254
Wondrous Myths and Legends (1999) 528
Wood, Michael 498–500, 502–503
Woolf, Greg 495
Woolner Brothers 149
Wyler, William (director) 111, 113, 123, 125–127, 130

Xena: Warrior Princess (1995–2001) 6, 299, 341, 446, 520
Xenophon 455–456, 461

Yonnet, Marcel (director) 81
Young Aphrodites (1963) 391
Young Hercules (1998–1999) 446, 515, 519–520
Yullisijeu (1998) 525

Zeno 459
Zervoulakis, Giorgos (director) 212
Zetterling, Mai (director) 212
Zimbalist, Sam 125, 127
Zorba the Greek (1964) 166
Zurlini, Valerio (director) 255

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